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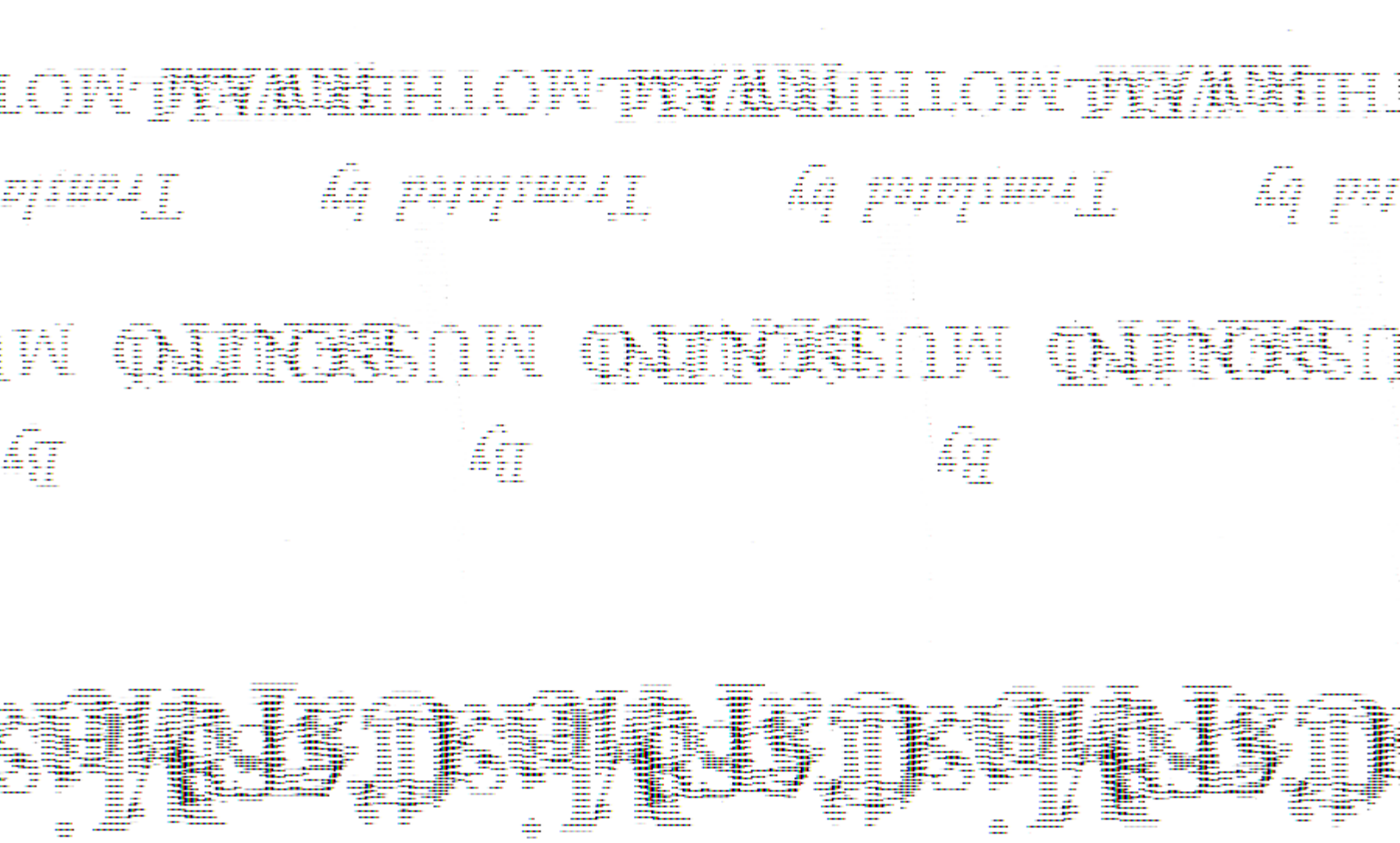
THE CARDINAL'S MISTRESS

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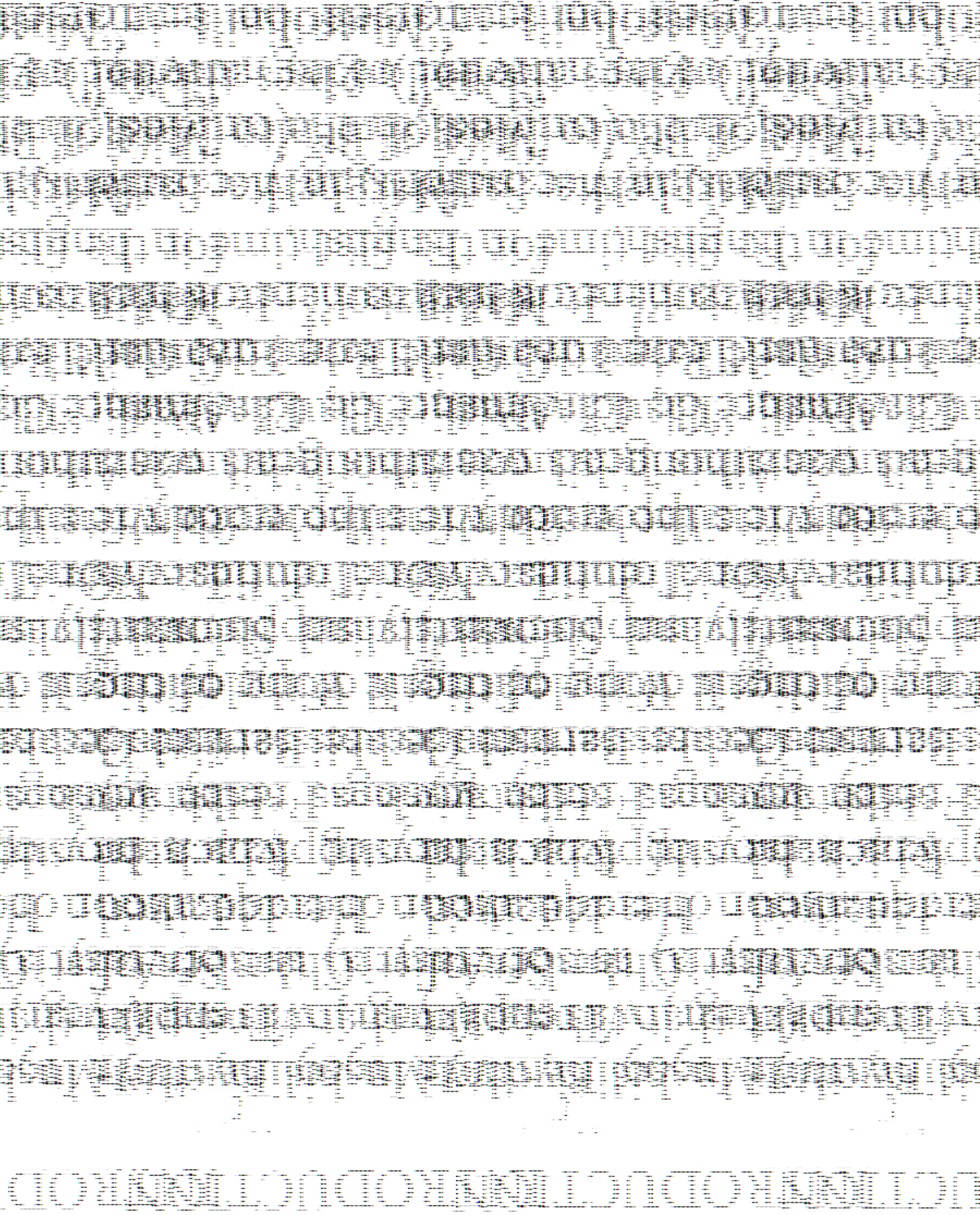
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have been written with a view to its use as a film and, as a matter of fact, it has, I believe, been turned to this account by some enterprising cinema company. It.....met with a colossal success. The author, efficient journalist that he is, is never lacking (even when he is amusing himself with his screed) in the infallible flair for what will strike the public. With all his own mental superiority, he knows how to stand for the public and the people himself. He has, moreover, a great relish for the tragic, as well as for vivid colours and heavy shades. This intuitive communion with the feelings of the mob enables him now in his capacity as statesman and head of the Government to keep his finger upon the pulse of the nation. As a storywriter it enabled him to think out the right words and phrases and events and climaxes. He showed that he possessed the 'common touch.' The feuilleton, then, was a huge success. Every now and again, however, the author got tired of his heroine, Claudia, and felt inclined to kill her off but Cesare Battisti would implore him not to do so. 'For Heaven's sake, don't!' Battisti would exclaim: 'the subscriptions are being renewed splendidly.' Thus balked of his chief victim, Mussolini's homicidal tendencies found scope among the subsidiary characters, and the fates of Claudia and her lover continued to set palpitating the hearts of all the young dressmakers and office-clerks and shop-assistants and artisans of the town."

Subsequently the romance was virtually forgotten. What was supposed to be the only remain-

ing copy was discovered a year or two ago by an Italian lady, who had it bound and presented it to the Duce, much to his delight. There exist, however, other copies in Italy and France.

Nothing written by the most conspicuous figure in contemporary Europe can fail to be of interest. And the present book, revealing the imagination of the youthful Mussolini working at fever heat, is unquestionably the most interesting of his early writings.

Despite Signora Sarfatti's bantering references to this pot-boiler, the work has its qualities. It is, of course, of a type of romance which has almost completely passed out of fashion—although that fashion was still flourishing, in America as well as in Europe, when it was written. Hence the story seems more remote from the present day in style than it is in time. The super-heated plot and extravagant language are common to all of its breed. Yet the style, by its very violence, acquires a certain distinction as the unconscious expression of an extraordinary temperament.

The novel gives little foretaste of the qualities which have since made Mussolini, as orator and controversialist, a very re-creator of Italian prose. The short sentences of his recent style, the blunt words, the shocks delivered in rapid succession like hammer blows, the curiously modern rhythmic sweep like the long throbbing of a huge turbine—all this, so different from the patterned melody of conventional oratorical and expository Italian prose, has brought a much-needed precision

and strength to a language which had unjustly been considered all drowsiness and song.

But it is not these qualities which appear in the present work. Rather it is a revelation of personality—a revelation perhaps the more authentic because the writing was done at break-neck speed by lamplight after the long day of pottering with proofs and complaints and make-up. This terrific piling up of magnificent words, this prodigal multiplication of metaphors within a single sentence, this passionate hunting out of detail and ever more detail in describing the aspect of a mountain side or the emotions of a guilty lover, are perhaps minor manifestations of that gargantuan vitality which has finally imposed itself on all Europe.

In literary matters Mussolini was largely his own school-master. His self-education was spotty but it was intense. Signora Sarfatti gives a picture of the kind of influence which must have been dominant in moulding the style of this novel.

"Victor Hugo," she says, "was one of the lad's chief educators." The scene which she pictures refers to a period when Mussolini was perhaps twelve years old, assistant to his father the blacksmith in the desolate mountain village of Dovia. The cowshed of which she speaks is no barn, but the ground floor of the Mussolini family mansion—one of the most imposing in the village. It is a sprawling peasant house, built of rough-hacked hunks of sandstone, mortared together with earth and clay. The floor is only stamped mud. There are but two or three windows, and the door is

tightly shut.

"A copy of 'Les Miserables' in an Italian translation, atrociously printed and produced, with two columns of small type to the page, and with many of the pages torn and some missing, had made its way somehow to the little village of Dovia, and Jean Valjean, Cosette and the saintly Bishop were to play their part in shaping the character of the boy, who read the book aloud in the cowshed in which, during the winter, the countryfolk loved to pass the time.

"They sat around in the dark corners while the oil lamp which hung from the roof sent forth its flickering light and the shadows came and went upon the rafters and the floor. The oxen went on eating their hay and ruminating, jostling up against each other. The women proceeded with their spinning, sewing and knitting; the men smoked their pipes and drank some drops of the weak wine which comes from pressing the already used grapes; the youths, foregathering with the girls, would now and again give out some jesting words or indulge in a playful shove which is the rustic way of paying court. The more vigorous the shove the warmer the feeling which it expresses. In this setting it was, and in the warm atmosphere generated by the breath of the cattle, that Benito read the book, reading on and on until eleven or twelve o'clock."

No one who has read Victor Hugo at the age of twelve ever quite recovers from his grandiloquence and his love of magnificent gesture.

The subsequent literary education of Mussolini was essentially of the same casual sort. Having finished the very elementary school of Predappio-Dovia, he went through a normal course in a school nearby Forlimpopoli, on pennies saved by his mother from her earnings as local school teacher. In this rudimentary schooling there was little true education.

It was not until he was discharged from his first teaching post in Guarltieri, for his subversive views and his general quarrelsomeness, and went as a vagabond to Switzerland, that real education began. In Switzerland he worked as hod-carrier, wine-carter, and finally as expert mason. Most of the money which he was able to save went to the purchase of second-hand books. Later, having mastered the French language well enough to be able to give private instruction in it to other Italians, he acquired the leisure to attend lectures at the University of Geneva and the Polytechnic of Zurich, although it does not appear that he pursued any formal courses of study. Expelled from one Swiss canton after another for inflammatory political speeches or for sheer mendicancy, he was finally obliged to leave the federal territory itself.

During all this period he absorbed the conventional romances of the bookstands, including Dumas pere and translations of Walter Scott, as well as Italian imitations like those of Tommaso Grassi. Of better literature he read especially those which were considered revolutionary in tenor, like those

of Tolstoi and Romain Rolland. And he sharpened his wits in interminable discussions and public debates on Marxian theory. Upon his expulsion from Switzerland he made a foray into Germany, in the course of which he devoured some of the German classics, not wisely perhaps, but gluttonously. The year before he wrote "The Cardinal's Mistress" was the adventurous year in his literary education.

He wrote about this time his essay on "The Philosophy of Force," largely derived from Nietzsche, formulating views which he has often since reiterated, and published, curiously enough, in a provincial Socialist weekly whose political editor was Arturo Labriola, now one of his bitterest enemies. He wrote an essay on "The Women in Schiller's William Tell," exalting their anti-Austrian patriotism, obviously addressed to the Italian women of the Austrian Tyrol. He wrote "On the Poetry of Fredrich Klopstock," the minor Milton of the German Risorgimento. He wrote a violent essay on John Huss which was to have formed part of a history of religion.

The one known work of fiction of this period, other than the present romance, is a short story, "Null'e vero, tutto é permesso," which has been published in much abbreviated form in English. It is a morbid and darkly coloured tale of the reciprocal emotions of wife and lover following the suicide of the husband.

And finally, he wrote a whole History of Philosophy. "All the philosophical systems,"

says Signora Sarfatti, "were dealt with in it critically and analytically, and all the new methods were subjected to a Nietzsche-like examination..... The actual manuscript, complete in every detail and ready for the printer, met with the strange fate of destruction at the hands of a young woman of the people who had some right to be jealous of the author. Rummaging about among his papers for evidence bearing upon her suspicions, she came upon the voluminous note-book. Darting her eyes over its pages, she noted any number of strange names and at once jumped to the conclusion that they were feminine names and that she had lighted upon an amorous correspondence. On the instant, the offending document was consigned to the flames and she was not satisfied until every bit of it had been reduced to ashes."

Not long afterwards Mussolini wrote in Il Popolo, "the frontier of Italy does not end at Ala" (the then frontier station). The Austrian authorities gave him a night in gaol and then decreed his deportation to Italy. At the frontier (the one he had said would have to be altered) the Austrian Police Commissioner released him from arrest on his promise that he would take the first train going South. It is said that Mussolini often recalls the incident, and when he speaks of it, it is with a thrill of emotion and gratitude in his voice.

When he crossed the frontier he plunged into Italian politics and his purely literary career was ended.

HIRAM MOTHERWELL

CHAPTER I

From the tiny churches hidden within the newly-budding verdure of the valleys, the even-song of the Ave Maria floated gently forth and died upon the lake. The riven peaks of the mountains gleamed in the last reflections of the setting sun and already the first shades of night, descending peacefully upon the forests and the solitary abodes of men, impelled way-farers to hasten their belated steps on the Giudicarie road. The caress of an invisible hand curled the wavelets of the lake which, with a weary murmur, licked the foliage of the ancient willows for ever casting their tresses upon the water.

On the shore opposite Castel Toblino a file of cypresses notched the horizon, and deep in the heavens quivered the stars. In the air there was the indefinable and penetrating exhalation of May, and through all trembled the echoes of the eternal song which the spring sings every year to Life, to the universal Life which can never die.

Carl Emanuel Madruzzo, Cardinal and Arch-bishop of Trent, and secular prince of the Trentino, had abandoned the oars of the little bark and seemed enchanted with the suavity of the hour. Facing him was Claudia. For a while the two lovers said no word to one another. The Cardinal

wore on his head an exquisite cap of black silk, and over his shoulders an ample garment of velvet upon which gleamed the silver clasps of his belt.

A month of sojourn in the castle had not benefited the health of the Prince. He had not been able to rest as he had intended. Too many cares tormented him; his soul was shaken by too many tempests. The wrinkles of his brow had become deeper; the nose, crooked in the middle, had become sharper; his large and widely opened eyes wore a look of melancholy; his blond hair fell in thinning locks over his temples; his whole figure was stooped not from old age, but beneath the weight of an ancient burning sorrow.

Claudia was leaning slightly over one side of the bark and had immersed her hand in the water to enjoy its freshness. Beneath her silken robe was visible the provocative outline of her body, and her white face gleamed beneath her black tresses. Her half-closed eyes understood the sorcery of poisonous passions.

The next day the Cardinal would be obliged to return to Trent and this was the last excursion which the two lovers would make together. The imminence of the parting saddened them. Their spirits were invaded by presentiments of woe. In the future, perhaps, would come the fulfilment of some obscure menace.

Emanuel raised his head, met the gaze of Claudia and decided to speak. The bark rode motionless in the midst of the lake beneath the

shades of night. The castle, with its few lighted windows, could scarcely be distinguished.

"To-morrow I shall return to Trent," said the Cardinal with a slight trembling of the voice. "You will remain here."

Claudia made a quick gesture of surprise, but Emanuel continued:

"It is necessary. To-morrow Donna Maria of Spain will depart."

"Was her departure not fixed for the end of June?" asked Claudia.

"That is true. But certain events have precipitated matters. This afternoon Don Benizio came to tell me of the unexpected decision. To-morrow I dare not fail to do the honours in the noble fashion which the traditions of my race require."

And, having pronounced these words, Emanuel returned in imagination to a time five months before, when Anna Maria arrived in Trent. It was but a few days before Christmas of the year 1648 that the advance guard of the princely cortege touched Italian soil a little beyond San Michele. Anna Maria, daughter of the Emperor Ferdinand III, King of Austria, journeyed accompanied by her brother Ferdinand, King of Hungary and Bohemia, by Cardinal d'Anaela, Archbishop of Prague, by Prince d'Aresnperg, by the Duke of Terranova, by the Margrave of Bada, and by many other princes, cavaliers and ladies, and was bound for Spain, where she was to wed Philip IV.

Emanuel Madruzzo, Bishop of Trent, went

out to meet her with a suite of five hundred gentlemen splendidly attired in rich and bizarre liveries, and at Gardolo, where the two magnificent processions met, Emanuel kissed the hand of the future queen of Spain and offered her hospitality in the castle of Bernard Clesio, which the first Madruzzi had transformed into a residence worthy of a papal or imperial court.

In the clear and cool morning air of December the trumpets of the horsemen and the songs of the pages summoned the peasants to the boulevard of Gardolo. They uncovered their heads with gestures of profound humility at the passing of the coach in which the young princess sat dreaming of future honours and grandeur and tasting in advance the joy of the impending nuptials. The people of the Trentino received the future queen of Spain with high festival.

At the first appearance of the procession, La Renga—the historical bell of patiently chiselled bronze—began to resound continuously in the high tower of the fortifications. The bells of the other towers responded, and in the serene sky—serene as only an Italian sky can be—and into all the valleys there penetrated the long reverberations of the knelling until it seemed that they might call to life the echoes sleeping beneath the wintry mist of the mountains and wake the souls of the dead. The artillery of the castle boomed in recurrent volleys.

In short, the entire population of Trent was in the streets. The merchants closed their shops,

the artisans their workrooms, the professional men their studios. The houses were emptied and women and children appeared in the doorways. Eager questions scurried from mouth to mouth, and every reply was accompanied and listened to with loud cries of admiration. And as though by a tacit sign of understanding, the crowd surged towards the "German section" in the San Martino quarter and took its place on either side of the road in which, far in the distance, the iron beat of horses' hoofs, the dazzling glitter of cuirasses, a flash of helmets and picks and halberds, and the crackling of arquebusades in volleys, announced the sovereign guest.

At the gate of the city the procession stopped to organize its triumphal pomp. Eight horse-men, clad in white, rode ahead. They wore no cuirasses and carried no arms. On each breast was a huge red cross. Not far behind followed the soldiers of the escort. The coach of Anna Maria, drawn by four richly caprisoned horses, was surrounded by ladies of the suite, by high dignitaries of the court, by the nobility and clergy of Bohemia, Hungary and the Trentino.

Following after this compact group which contained descendants of all the noblest races of Europe—from the furrowed lands of the Danube to the sea-washed plains of the Manzanare, from the limitless steppes of Hungary to the green hills of Bohemia, from the snowy peaks to the fertile plains of the Eridano—rode an immense troop of horsemen, superb in their burnished steel armour.

They were the veterans of the last war, which had just been ended with the universal peace of Munster; soldiers of all tongues, the heroes of many a cavalry charge—now reduced to purely decorative functions since the romantic and ideal meaning which once had been ascribed to them had vanished under the diabolical irony of Cervantes the poet.

The procession ended with a long file of baggage-trains. And behind pressed the people who had watched the parade with admiring eyes. The cries of the crowd, who as always, forgot their daily misery in this vision of splendour, were from time to time drowned by the notes of a horn into which a giant horseman from Bohemia was blowing with all the strength of his lungs.

Emanuel Madruzzo now recalled every particular of this ceremony. He recalled the gaiety of the Trentince people, the addresses of the Chamberlains, the brief phrases of Anna Maria, the ceremony in the Cathedral, the evening illumination of the city. Anna had been much moved by the splendour of her reception.

Then came long winter weeks which were whiled away in entertainments, hunts and banquets not inferior to those of Lucullus. Three months after the entrance of Anna Maria in Trent no fewer than five princes were lodged in the castle: the queen-bride, the king of Hungary, the Archduke Ferdinand Carl—with the Archduchess his consort—the Archduke Francis Sigismund, the Bishop of Augusta, and the Duke of Mantua. Few courts in Europe could at that time rival the house of

Madruzzo.

Emanuel, the last, had the maecenism and the prodigality of the lords who governed the Italian cities in the dawn of the Renaissance. He squandered his wealth, since in him the race would be extinguished and the Principate left without an heir. Of what use to save money in anticipation of a future which would never be? It was better to live without worrying. Rejoice and forget!

Then for twenty years the passion of love had seized him with such volume that he cursed the Principate and despised the purple of the cardinalate. He loved Claudia.

This relation was universally known and for the most part condemned and regarded as a serious sin. The spirit of Emanuel Madruzzo, naturally inclined to sentiments of virtue inherited from his maternal ancestors, had long been the theatre of a struggle between two opposing sentiments: the duties of the Principate and the dignity of the purple on the one hand and, on the other, his love for Claudia. Between them he was lashed into one of those tragic passions which wreck men's lives. During the spring in which the court of Trent entertained the most illustrious and powerful personages of Europe, the life of the castle and of Trent was intense and tumultuous. Emanuel sought to numb himself in the hope of calming the inner struggle which was tearing him to pieces. He failed.

By the end of April he had obliged Claudia to leave. He feared for her life, since it was threatened

by a conspiracy which, it was said, had been formed among the ecclesiastics hostile to the house of the Madruzzo. She had retired to Castel Toblino, guarded and defended by a group of ruffians in whom Emanuel placed the utmost confidence. But within a few days Emanuel himself had joined her at Castel Toblino.

The afternoon following the conversation between Claudia and her Prince, Anna Maria of Spain left Trent. Emanuel had wished to give to the departure, as to the arrival, a character of solemnity. While the long procession wended its way through the Borgo Nuovo in the direction of Verona the bells rang in unison and the artillery fired salutes from the castle.

But the people who in December had fallen over one another to acclaim the royal guest, were now absent. The sojourn of Anna had emptied the coffers of the Principate and had obliged the Cardinal to impose new and odious taxes which bore upon all classes of society. The quarrels between the Trentini and the Spaniards of the queen's suite were frequent and brought discord and mourning to many families. The discontent, augmented by more remote causes became evident. The councillors of the prince, among whom Claudia's father, Ludovico Particella, was predominant, feared an outburst of popular wrath. At the time of the Great Council the poor of the town had been confined in the quarter below the castle, in order that the sight of their wretchedness might not disturb the digestions of the two hundred

and sixteen bishops, the twenty-two archbishops, the five legates and the two cardinals, the three patriarchs, and the innumerable band of minor priests who discussed Catholic theology in Santa Maria Maggiore. But now misery knocked at all doors and forced the sick men, women and children, to go begging in the valleys.

It was therefore with a sigh of relief that the city watched the queen depart.

Emanuel Madruzzo accompanied her as far as Materello. Here, amid great commotion on the part of the personages of the suite, the final farewells were said. Anna, after a brief sojourn at Roverto, would continue her journey to Madrid, where Philip IV was waiting to lead her to the altar.

CHAPTER II

Emanuel returned to Trent the same evening, and after eating with a few friends—temperately, as was his custom when guests were not at his table—retired to his apartments. He read a few urgent papers which dealt with political matters, and then began to recite Virgil. He found comfort and support in the sweet Latin poet. The sense of poetry was not lacking in the Madruzzo family, Cristoforo had been a poet of some small talent, as was evidenced by his Latin verses addressed to J. Vargnano d'Arco. Emanuel did not write verse, but in the hours of sorrow he went to the great classics as one would go to trusted friends for consolation. After reading an entire canto of the Eneid, he kissed a long silver crucifix, and thinking of the distant Claudia went to sleep.

Horrible dreams disturbed him all night long. In the morning he was still in a heavy slumber when his valet, according to orders, knocked lightly on his door to awaken him. Emanuel arose. He dressed quickly. He was going, simply clothed, and without luxury of useless adornment, to the audience hall beneath.

A huge crowd awaited him. There were officials of the guard and officials of police, come to ask orders and present reports. There were

priests from the mountain valleys come to confide to the Cardinal their secret worries. There were merchants demanding no doubt the remittance or the diminution of their taxes. There were peasants recognizable by their hats, their wrinkled and bronzed faces and their enormous boots. There were the poor who had suffered some misfortune and placed their hopes in the justice of the great lord. In the rear of the hall pressed the usual miserable throng of wretches begging their daily alms.

At the appearance of the Cardinal silence fell. Don Benizio, Ludovico Particella, Jacob Mersi, the doctor and ex-academician, Mario Guidello, the son of the famous Trentine physician and philosopher, Orazio Petrolini, the quibbling lawyer, Giovanni Leveghi, the veterinary and supervisor of the stables, Pantater Corrado, the majordomo were present. All bowed low before Emanuel.

There were but few affairs of sufficient importance to be treated personally by the Cardinal. The order was given to clear the hall. The crowd retired into the lateral corridors. While the councillors of the prince were attending to the minor affairs in the hall, Emanuel withdrew to his private chamber to hear and adjudicate the more weighty matters.

The private chamber was not large, but it was furnished with a feeling for beauty. In the centre was a walnut table covered with books and papers and surrounded by a few high-backed and exquisitely inlaid chairs. A very rich carpet lay on

the floor, and long curtains of velvet concealed the windows and the door. The ceiling was a prodigy of decoration. Upon the walls hung portraits of the Madruzzo ancestors.

Here, only a few months before, a beautiful and innocent girl had been imprisoned by order of Emanuel Madruzzo—his niece, Filiberta.

The unhappy girl was the only daughter of the dead Count Victor Madruzzo, and thus heiress to all the family wealth. Accordingly, as the chroniclers relate, many sought her hand in marriage, knights and princes of Italy and of Germany, under conditions which would have brought the Bishop glory and tranquillity.

Emanuel had rejected them all. He rejected the intervention of great princes and sovereigns. He desired instead to give her in marriage to Vincent Particella, son of the Councillor Ludovico, a young man of most noble qualities. But Filiberta loved, with a love that was profoundly reciprocated, the Count Antonio di Castelnuovo.

From this arose the quarrel with the uncle who perhaps dreamed of finding in the house of Particella the heir of the Principate. Finally he sent her into virtual imprisonment in the Convent of the Holy Trinity.

The news of this imprisonment had profoundly excited the imagination of the people, and the Cardinal lost thereby a great part of his popularity, "drawing unto himself the hatred and aversion of many citizens." The petitions urged by the Count Antonio di Castelnuovo for the liberation of Fili-

berta and for her hand, were shipwrecked upon the irrevocable decision of the prince. It was said that he was influenced by Claudia, against whom no one hesitated to cast the stones of calumny and abomination. Claudia of the dark and devilish eyes, Claudia who walked among the humble folk like a sorceress capable of any crime, Claudia who had willed the seclusion of Filiberta, her troublesome and dangerous rival—in this form the legend leaped from mouth to mouth.

Meanwhile Filiberta had refused the veil in the expectation that she would be liberated. Months passed. And instead of the liberation so ardently desired, came death. One evening the Mother Superior herself opened the ancient creaking portal. For the visitor was none other than the Bishop and Prince. Emanuel's valet and the coachman remained in the court-yard.

Guided by a sister the Cardinal crossed a long corridor; from the little closed cell could be heard the faint murmuring of prayer. At the end of the corridor was the room occupied by Filiberta. Emanuel entered with hesitating step. He placed his coat in one corner, and approached the bed on which the unhappy girl lay in agony.

The night had already descended and through the tiny window could be heard the chirping of the crickets in the stubble. The room, a little larger than the ordinary cells, contained but two chairs, a bed and the little table upon which stood an oil lamp.

Gigantic black shadows were limned on the

white walls. From time to time a sob of the sick girl rent the silence. Phthisis had emaciated Filiberta's countenance and a cadaverous pallor had taken the place of the rose glow of first youth, but the eyes, which had become deeper, preserved all their passionate intensity.

The eyes were fixed immovably on one point. The girl's disordered hair fell over the pillow. Her hands lay underneath the covers, beneath which her body was indicated by a scarcely visible line. Emanuel dared not speak. The sight of Filiberta dying had turned him to stone. He was the person solely and uniquely responsible for her miserable end. He had had her imprisoned, yielding perhaps to the threats or the prayers of Claudia. He had kept her imprisoned, caring not for the protests of the people or for the prayers of her true lover. He had deprived his niece of the sun, and above all he had violated the instinct of her heart by seeking to marry her to a man whom she did not love and could never love.

Emanuel Madruzzo must now eat of the fruit of his obstinacy. Before him lay the innocent victim. Remorse clutched his heart. He could not succeed in calming himself with illusory hopes and the projects for the future which were crossing his imagination. Too late! All his faith, all his riches and his titles, his blood itself, would not have arrested the progress of the malady nor exorcised the imminent catastrophe. Horrible situation! The uncle responsible for Filiberta's death! If a miracle could have saved her he would have flung

open all the doors of the convent to give her to liberty, to life, to the man whom she loved. Too late! Emanuel fixed his eyes upon those of Filiberta. He sought to penetrate them, to read within the motionless pupils the thoughts passing through the soul of the dying girl. What were those eyes saying? Was she pardoning him or cursing him? Emanuel leaned over the pillow, stroked the damp forehead, and cried:

"Filiberta!—Filiberta!"

But he obtained no response.

"Call her," said Emanuel to the sister who was praying at the foot of the bed. And the sister called:

"Filiberta!—Filiberta!"

In vain. Filiberta did not reply.

"Hear me, Filiberta!" Emanuel implored her again. "Hear me I am your uncle; I have come to get you and make you well and take you away—"

A nervous shudder seized the head of the dying girl. Did she perhaps hear the frantic call?

She sank again into her previous immobility. The sobbing ceased. Emanuel knelt down, took Filiberta's hand and covered it with kisses, continuing to call to her. The desperation of this fifty-year-old man, who had come to be present at the death-agony of his victim, was perhaps more tragic than the destiny of the unhappy one who was dying. In a broken voice he repeated:

"Filiberta, forgive me!—Forgive me the evil

that I have done you—Forgive your old uncle!"

Suddenly, as though impelled by the lash, Emanuel rushed out of the cell, dashed up the stairway, and entered the convent church. His steps awoke long and fearful echoes; the church was immersed in darkness. A tiny hanging lamp indicated the high altar. Emanuel knelt down with his forehead touching the ground. The stones of the pavement gave forth a hollow sound: beneath were the crypts of the dead.

At last he permitted his tears to flow unchecked. His sobbing echoed ominously. One who had seen him in that hour would have rushed away crying: "A madman! A madman!"

Yes, Emanuel was mad. The reason of this man approaching the sunset of life was tottering. Destiny's blow was too brutal. How long did he remain in the deserted chapel invoking a God who could not grant his petition? At last Emanuel left the chapel. He passed like a black phantom through the corridor and turned toward the cell of Filiberta.

The sister was still praying at the foot of the bed. She arose as the Cardinal entered and said:

"She is dead!"

At this news, a single piercing cry burst from Emanuel's breast. It filled the rooms, echoed in the corridors, and lost itself in the impenetrable night.

At last the sister raised her head. She gently lifted Filiberta's arms and crossed them on her breast. Upon it she laid a crucifix and a rosary.

Then she straightened the bedcovers, and drew a white veil over the dead girl's forehead. Then she filled the lamp, and departed.

The Cardinal followed her. In the corridor he turned and said quietly to her:

"You will not give an indication to a living soul of what has happened to-night.....I order that Filiberta be buried before dawn. And, above all, I desire that no one give out notice of her death. Later I shall send further orders. For the moment it is necessary to keep her secret. I have complete confidence in the men who have accompanied me. You are responsible for the sisters who are under you."

The old nun bowed low and assured him that she would fulfil the desires of her superior with perfect obedience and to the last detail.

Emanuel rejoined his valet and coachman, who were sleeping while they waited. They were not aware of the pitiable condition of their lord. The horses were whipped into a gallop. Emanuel wished to reach the castle quickly: he needed to hide himself. It seemed to him that all the shadows of night accused him, that he was being pursued by a procession of phantoms whose mission it was ceaselessly to renew remorse in his heart. At a certain point in the road it seemed to him that the dead niece appeared before him, determined to obstruct his passage. She was dressed in white, and was so tall that she seemed to touch the stars which glittered in the May night. The coach passed; it was the monstrous

vision of hallucinated brain. Emanuel closed his eyes that he might see no more. From the meadows the crickets continued to chirp their monotonous song.

CHAPTER III

Two months had passed since the death of Filiberta and the secret of her untimely end had been kept. But the Count di Castelnuovo, concerned at the long silence of his betrothed, had made inquiries at the castle, at the office of the Aulic Council, at the convent of the Mother Superior, and of various influential personages. The Mother Superior, obedient of the order received from the Cardinal, had replied to the Count di Castelnuovo that Filiberta had been transferred to another convent in Italy in care of the order of the "Buried Alive." But this declaration, far from quieting the spirit of the Count, agitated it only the more with doubt and suspicions.

Claudia had not moved from Castel Toblino. Vainly she awaited the moment when she could return as the legitimate princess of Trent. Fra Luigi had brought bad news from Rome. Pope Innocent X, in a letter written by his own hand and given to Fra Luigi for transmission to the Cardinal Emanuel Madruzzo, stated that he found the latter's requests strange and sinful. But the Cardinal had not laid down his arms. When Innocent X died and Alexander VII mounted the throne, Claudia's lover had invoked the intercession of the Queen of Spain and the King of Hungary.

In his petitions he prayed the Pontiff "paternally to concede the privilege of returning to the lay state and taking a wife," and reinforced his supplications with the attestations of his confessors, Fra Macario of Venice of the "minori osservanti," and Vettore Barbacovi of the Cathedral of Trent. The Cardinal was so confident of obtaining from the Court of Rome the permission to doff the sacerdotal habit, and assume the estate of a free and married man, that he had even ordered the bride's wedding apparel.

But while he was lulling himself in these sweet hopes, internal events placed the very existence of the Principate in serious peril.

After two months the very walls of the Convent of the Holy Trinity were speaking. Don Benizio, as a result of many mysterious subterfuges, had succeeded in penetrating the secret. He had said nothing about it to the Aulic Council, to avoid precipitating events, but he had informed two of the five priests who composed the Chapter of the Cathedral. The entire Chapter was immediately convoked for the first Sunday in August. To avoid creating suspicion, they chose for their meeting place the house of Don Benizio near the Piazza di Fiera.

At the hour appointed the five priests of the Chapter were present. They were joined by Don Benizio, who was to impart the expected information.

A council of priests is always a funereal affair. The costume itself inspires dread. These five

prelates were the bitterest enemies of the Cardinal. They had severely censured him first for having absented himself from the city "in the moment of greatest distress of his flock, to wit, during the epidemic of 1630;" then for the scandal of his affair with Claudia Particella; and finally for maladministration of public affairs. Their hatred dated from the year 1631, when his fervid appeal to the Cardinal Barberini had procured the appointment of Giovanni Todeschini, his own agent in Rome, as Deacon of Trent. The canons were disgusted that "a newcomer should attain at a single bound the supreme capitulary dignity." They submitted a complaint to Rome. The litigation had lasted eighteen years.

Further, the Chapter had recently sent a petition to the Imperial Council, praying that it "mitigate the administrative disorders of the Bishopric." As representatives of Caesar there descended upon Trent the Bishop of Bressanone and the Baron Tobia di Hanlitz. A compromise was reached whereby the Bishop must, in affairs of major importance, request the assistance of the Chapter and submit to their common decision. This compromise was a severe blow to the Cardinal's authority. The Chapter did not confine itself to the supervision and direction of sacred and profane matters, but intervened directly in questions concerning the Principate, and even felt free to censure the Cardinal's private actions. Hence, not one of the six persons seated at the table in Don Benizio's library was well disposed towards Emanuel

Madruzzo.

The meeting opened with the sign of the cross made by all present, followed by a few prayers absent-mindedly mumbled in Latin. All faces were extremely serious as Don Benizio gave sign that he was about to speak. Since the obscurity of night was already descending in the small room, a lamp was lighted in the centre of the table. The faces of the ecclesiastics remained in shadow. Don Benizio began:

"You all know, my honoured colleagues, of the tragic end of Filiberta."

At this news none of the prelates moved or showed any serious perturbation. Only the prior extended on the table his hands with their long fingers, crooked like the claws of a beast of prey.

"The death occurred two months ago. Inquiries were made by persons interested in learning the secret which surrounded the sad event. The Cardinal—and this, my venerable colleagues, will hardly surprise you—the Cardinal Emanuel Madruzzo, our shepherd and prince, ordered, while the remains of the unhappy virgin were yet warm, that they should immediately be entombed in the subterranean crypts of the convent church, and ordered the Mother Superior to preserve silence. But the betrothed of Filiberta, the Count Antonio di Castelnuovo, insistently demanded information concerning her, and was unable to content himself with the laconic declarations which were made to him at the castle and at the convent. He in-

formed me of his doubts, he communicated to me his suspicions. He begged my advice.

"I thereupon proceeded to the Convent of the Holy Trinity, but without result. The sister faithfully obeyed the order she had received, and refused to enter into particulars as to the death of Filiberta. The despairing Count proposed to me that we should enter the convent by night. I agreed. The fate of Filiberta interested me, because it interests our entire population and because I hoped to be able to restore the recluse, by some happy stroke, to safety and liberty."

The exordium, spoken in a calm yet vibrant voice, challenged the interest of all present. All heads were bent over the table and were illuminated by the light of the lamp. The eyes of the prior gleaned with an evil curiosity.

"At dusk," continued Don Benizio, "we scaled the wall at the easiest point and hid ourselves to await the night in the high grass of an abandoned orchard.

"We were both armed. We heard the bell summoning the nuns to evening prayer, and there came to our ears the notes of a hymn of thanksgiving chanted in the choir of the church. After the service was over and the nuns had withdrawn, we stealthily entered the church and remained some time motionless behind a column. On the altar shone the customary light. The shadows of our bodies were projected in gigantic proportions upon the walls of the nave, upon the lateral altars, upon the organ behind. The silence was

so profound that we could hear the accelerated beating of our own hearts. Neither of us dared speak or take a step for fear we would awaken the echoes of the dead.

"Finally I decided to shake the Count, who seemed lost in an ocean of turbid thoughts and macabre fantasies.

" 'Let us descend,' I said to him, 'into the crypts. If Filiberta is dead they could not have buried her elsewhere.'

"My words came from my mouth like a mere breath, yet to me they seemed shouted aloud. We walked on tiptoe and our steps reverberated ominously. I reached for the hand of Antonio. It was cold.

"To find the gate of the crypt we had to make the whole circuit of the church. Before descending we put down our arms, except for the dagger which we might need to prise open the cover of the tomb. Holding fast to one another we crept down the stair. After reaching the bottom we groped our way, holding our hands outstretched before us to orient ourselves against a possible enemy. Into our dilated pupils penetrated no ray of light. But to our ears came the sound of foul nocturnal insects fleeing at our approach, while the mouldy odour of those funereal catacombs stunned us, suffocated us.

" 'We must have light,' said Antonio, 'but where shall we get it?' I recalled that upon the high altar the eternal light of the Sacrament was burning. I found the stairs again and made my way toward

the altar. I felt a moment of hesitation, because it seemed to me that I was committing a sacrilege. I removed the lamp. The flame fluttered as though it was about to become extinguished, and threw a mass of shadows, fantastic, enormous, fearful, upon the floor, behind the nave, upon the ceiling. I descended the stairs."

But at this point a voice interrupted the narrator. It was a priest seated beside the prior, a subtle and sophistical fellow, who had lived long in Rome and had carried away with him a taste for judicial questions and a mania for disputation.

"Excuse me, Don Benizio, if I interrupt the flow of your dramatic narrative which so holds us all in suspense.....But in your action there are the elements of sacrilege. You have committed robbery.....For your personal ends you took from the altar the lamp which no one may take and no one may extinguish.....I place your case before my colleagues present, and in particular before our eminent director."

The question so unexpectedly raised did not fail to surprise Don Benizio and the other priests. The Council of Trent had fixed the tenets of the faith, but had not excluded the possibility of theological discussions. Each case had its own interpretation, variable according to the time, the place and the form. The present case might be stated thus:

"Had Don Benizio committed sacrilege or not, in taking from the high altar the eternal lamp?"

In these terms the prior submitted the thesis

to his colleagues, inviting them to give their opinions briefly.

The first to demand a hearing was Don Rescalli. He officiated in Santa Maria Maggiore, and was known as a zealous curate of souls and of bodies. He rose to his feet and leaned over the table, his tall and distorted figure bent like a crossbow. His lean face was framed by reddish hair: his eyes had the penetrating glance of men accustomed to impose their will, the subtle lips terminated in the line that is characteristic of ungoverned and malignant temperaments.

"The case which has been raised at this moment does not merit the honour of a long discussion. The doctors of the Hebraic laws reproved Jesus because he worked miracles even on the Sabbath day, consecrated by the ancient laws to absolute repose. You know the response of Christ: 'What man shall there be among you that shall have one sheep and if it fall into a pit on the Sabbath day, will he not lay hold on it, and lift it out?' "

"This is not precisely the same case," objected the sophist. "The terms of the comparison are not exact. It was not to lift up an ass or to find a lost sheep that Don Benizio took the sacred and perennial flame from the altar. He was constrained to commit the act through forgetfulness or improvidence. Don Benizio knew that there was no light in the crypts. He should have provided himself with the requisite torches."

He executed a vague gesture and continued:

"However, it is far from my idea to make of

this a casus theologicus. It might form the matter of a future discussion. I merely raised it academically, incidentally."

The prior, who had wrinkled his brow and closed his eyes in the attitude of one who seeks the solution of some grave problem, extended the hands with the hooked fingers on the table-cloth, and pronounced his verdict:

"It is not possible to speak of sacrilege in the present instance. It is true that Don Benizio could have provided himself with the necessary torches, and thus would not have been obliged to take the altar lamp. But since the sacred lamp did not leave the church, but instead remained on consecrated ground, any sacrilegious character attributable to the action disappears."

The prelates accepted the sentence of the prior with bowed heads and Don Benizio continued:

"I held the lamp at the height of my forehead and we were able to distinguish the details of the space into which we had descended. Within crypts dug out of the solid rock, and extended to conform to the foundations of the church, were the tombs of the deceased nuns. An insupportable stench took away our breath. Black spiders wove their webs in the angles from crypt to crypt. The entire wall was pierced with deep holes in which the bats and the insects of the tombs hid themselves.

"We proceeded further, inclining our heads as we entered the crypts, believing that the rough wooden lids of the sepulchres bore the names of the entombed. But all were nameless in the pre-

sence of death. At the back there was a wooden casket still intact.

"A strange presentiment carried us thither. I passed several times, lamp in hand, by this object of white fir, not yet contaminated by the unclean animals which inhabit the bowels of the earth. The Count of Castelnuovo trembled like a leaf.

" 'It is here,' he said, in a voice which was scarcely a thread of sound. 'My heart does not deceive me.'

"But he dared not kneel to lift the lid and ascertain the horrible reality. I insinuated the point of my dagger at the joining of the planks, close to the nails. I had overcome the first sensations of horror. My companion, seated at the edge of an adjacent crypt, regarded me with eyes like those of a slaughtered sheep. The point of the dagger penetrated the wood, which creaked a lament such as to make one shudder. Little by little I loosened all the boards of the lid.....

"We were not deceived.....It was the remains of Filiberta.

"The acrid odour of decomposing human flesh compelled us to draw back a few paces.....Then Antonio wished to see the woman whom he had so loved, so desired. The body was recognizable by the golden hair which fell over the pure forehead, and by the eyes not yet contaminated. But from the lips, decomposed into a ferocious grin, oozed a dense, whitish liquid."

Don Benizio dwelt on this disagreeable detail, knowing it would not frighten the inquisitorial

souls which heard him. For it is characteristic of the Catholic Church, such a descriptive apotheosis of youth, beauty and flesh, of the mortal body which in the cold solitude of the sepulchres returns to vile dust, while the soul, purified and freed of its mortal remains, awaits the summons of the apocalyptic trumpet of the Most High Judge.

Moreover, Don Benizio was accustomed to the sight of corpses. It gave him pleasure to speak of death. He felt a secret satisfaction in the consoling thought of worms devouring, fibre by fibre, the proud carcass of man.

No one could escape this destiny! Neither prince nor pope! Nor the fair women whom Don Benizio coveted with that lust which is born of forced chastity, flagellated by wanton thoughts and images of bestial unions.

Nor—Claudia Particella, the courtesan of Trent, one more of that band of celebrated concubines whom Don Benizio had not been able to conquer!

"When, as the lamp flared up," he continued, "Antonio had gazed upon the remains of Filiberta, he raised his hands to Heaven and cried:

" 'Murderer! Murderer!'

"Then he fell as though lifeless to the ground. His breast heaved to the rhythm of a silent sobbing which was suffocated in his throat.

"I placed a hand upon his mouth to suppress his cries. The nuns slept lightly and might awaken at any sound. I bent over my companion, lifted him up, and obliged him to follow me.

"We retraced our steps through the church. I replaced the lamp upon the altar. Once more we climbed the wall and so made our way to the city. During the whole time the Count shouted curses and cried out tor vengeance. Too late we became aware of a fatal oversight. We had abandoned the tomb without replacing the cover; we had left the dagger in the crypt and our arms in a corner of the church.

"My story is finished. But I say to you that those responsible for the death of Filiberta must be punished, or the people will revolt."

"But the people as yet know nothing," remarked the Prior, who like his colleagues had not been greatly moved by the funereal narrative.

"They will know it soon," declared Don Benizio.

The theologian intervened to ask:

"Who is the person directly and immediately responsible for Filiberta's death?"

"Her uncle the Cardinal—I do not hesitate to say so," replied Don Benizio.

"Exactly," added Don Rescalli. "It was by the Cardinal's order that Filiberta was imprisoned in the Convent of the Holy Trinity. I recall that this was the cause of serious agitation among the people."

"An agitation," added Don Benizio, "which will doubtless be repeated in more severe form as soon as the truth is known."

"Under these circumstances," asked the Prior, "what action should the Chapter take?"

A priest, who had previously remained silent, now spoke. He was short and ruddy, his grey eyes almost hidden within the puffy rotundity of his cheeks. His lips were pink and sensual.

"It seems to me," he said, "that it would be well to submit the matter to the Papal and the Imperial Courts. The Principate of Trent must be rescued from a situation which daily becomes more critical. The death of Filiberta, occasioned indirectly by her uncle, Emanuel Madruzzo, is the last drop which makes the vessel overflow. The Cardinal of Trent must be placed under the tutelage of a man who knows how to rule. Otherwise our land will be the theatre of tumults and our people will plunge it into ruin."

"But the people," interrupted Don Benizio, "are especially hostile to the family of the Particella and to Claudia. This woman must be sent away from the Principate."

"I am afraid that will not be easy to do," objected the Prior.

"We must try," insisted Don Benizio, "to persuade her to abandon the Principate. And if gentle methods will not prevail, then we must frighten her away. The moment seems to me particularly propitious."

"You," said the Prior, "in your quality of private secretary to the Cardinal, might accept that mission."

"Very willingly, if the Chapter has naught to urge to the contrary," replied the priest, and a diabolical flash of satisfaction gleamed in his eyes.

"Then we are agreed," concluded the Prior, "that we shall write an urgent and full communication to the Pope and to the Emperor, begging their intervention in the affairs of the Principate. In the meantime it will be well to calm the passions of the people. Ours is a ministry of peace and good-will. If events should precipitate themselves, I shall not fail to summon you.....And now we can go our several ways."

CHAPTER IV

Don Benizio accompanied his colleagues to the door. On his return to his own room he could not resist a gesture of triumph. Thoughts of vengeance, of conquest, of long-desired gratifications, assailed his brain as he was undressing for the night. "To-morrow! To-morrow!" he exclaimed to himself. "The strayed lamb can no longer evade me. I shall use fair means and foul, language that is fractious or threatening; I shall promise—oh, I shall promise much. Ah, Claudia, to-morrow you shall be mine!"

And Don Benizio's slumber was disturbed by the vision of Woman—Woman in that lustrous nakedness that haunts the repressed desire of love of those prisoners of chastity. Claudia of the Satanic leer, of the rounded shoulders, of the perfumed hair, of the paradisaic mouth, of the white and tender flesh—Claudia the courtesan. Claudia the Woman, offering unimaginable caresses, ineffable voluptuousness, ecstasy to the point of delirium, of exasperation.

The priest's flesh quivered, like a sylvan god gazing on the image of a nude nymph mirrored in the water of a limpid and silent brook. Don Benizio had been rejected by Claudia as one sends away an importunate beggar. He had loved her,

secretly at first, pining away in an impotent jealousy because of her indifference. He had dedicated verses to her, and had done her humble services with the deferential insistence of those who dare not dare. At last he had declared his love.

It was when the Cardinal was in Rome. One evening Don Benizio met Claudia as she was strolling through the deer-park. He told her of his love. He begged of her a single gracious glance, a single kind word.

His eloquence expressed itself in sobs, after the manner of men who cannot restrain the impetus of their passion when they find themselves in the presence of woman. And Claudia had smiled a smile of mockery and pity. Don Benizio was not the first! Many others had laid siege to her, but in vain! Hence the inextinguishable hatred which the ecclesiastics felt for her.

She had rejected their declarations of love, had laughed at them, had sent them about their business.

She had caused the most insistent and distasteful to be punished. Don Benizio recognized in the compassionate smile of Claudia an eternal repulse. But he did not lay down his arms. For many years he had tried every diabolical means to end the relation between Claudia and the Cardinal. Patient workman that he was, he created innumerable misunderstandings, spread endless gossip. Claudia was not unaware of the activities of this priest. She meant some day to ruin him, but she did not think much about it. Emanuel's love was enough

for her, and she forgot the snares of the lovelorn priest whom she had rejected and ridiculed.

At last, Don Benizio, after ten years of fruitless manoeuvres, had recourse to threats. He expected no easy revenge. Claudia was too intelligent, too proud to surrender quickly to the apocalyptic menaces of Don Benizio and his emissaries. However, the priest did not renounce his dream. Rather, he had made it the ambition of his life.

To possess Claudia he would have sold his soul to Satan, and would have chosen the pyres of hell in preference to the beatitudes of heaven to all eternity. Passion—in which hate and love alternated—had finally congealed the soul of the priest. He had become as stone, as marble in his desire. And now that his virility was nearing its end, libidinous fires obsessed him and tortured his flesh. He was like the bow drawn and aimed, tense to the point at which it gives, and then breaks.

On that glorious August morning the valley of the Giudicarie was still immersed in fog, which, however, was gradually melting under the blaze of the sun. From the forest which sloped down to the dusty road came the songs of the woodsmen and the dry blows of the axes as they embedded themselves in the trunks of the firs and oaks. In the fields, rekindled by the summer heat, the yellow stubble was withering away, while the sombre green of the vine tendrils proudly displayed itself on the hill-sides. From the houses of peasants, from the huts of shepherds, subtle spirals of white smoke indicated the existence of a hearth and a

family.

The villages were deserted, for men and women had betaken themselves to the fields and the woods, leaving at home none but the invalids.

Don Benizio galloped furiously, not answering the few pedestrians who stopped to interrogate him. The horse was neighing, dilating his moist nostrils to sniff the morning air, and his iron shoes struck sparks from the stones of the mountain road. On the hill-grade he diminished his pace. In these brief intervals Don Benizio cast a glance about him, as though to search in the aspect of inanimate things for some prophetic sign or token.

Then the gallop was resumed. Don Benizio's mantle flapped in the wind over the horse's back and grazed the ground like the wing of a crow flying low in search of carrion. The rider dug his spurs into the flanks of his space-devouring steed. Into the air were flung flakes of white foam which took rainbow tints from the rays of the sun. Don Benizio, leaning over the mane of his horse, had the appearance of some monstrous black centaur.

But once in sight of Castel Toblino, Don Benizio slackened his pace. The lake appeared to his eyes like a surface of brightly polished bronzed metal, motionless beneath the rays of the sun. The tiny island in its midst projected its scrubby greenery over the water. No human voice arose from the solitary shores which encircled with a green girdle the marvellous green goblet with its clear green transparent liquid.

Erect upon his motionless horse, Don Benizio

gazed at the castle which hacked the horizon with its two pinnacles of grey stone. It was the time to plan and prepare the assault. The fair rival and inflexible enemy was not far distant. Within a few moments he would be in the presence of the dangerous woman who had poisoned his existence. Claudia was there, within those walls. Perhaps she was still sleeping.

What would he say to her? How would he commence? The exordium is always the most difficult and embarrassing part of any speech..... Don Benizio talked to himself and rent the air with magnificent gestures which betrayed his impatience and fear.

"The mission is delicate," he said to himself. "Claudia fears me, I am sure of that, and my first words must not alarm her. I shall be gracious, insinuating.....She must pardon me and esteem me if she is to love me.....though it be but for a day."

Don Benizio remained seated on his horse in the meditative and intent attitude of a captain observing the field of battle. Then he spurred his mount and quickly traversed the stretch of road which separated him from the castle. The oaken portal bound by gigantic slabs of steel, upon which gleamed huge copper nails and knockers, was open wide. At the sound of the pawing of the horse a servant appeared at the window, and then presented himself at the portal not a little surprised at the visit of the black guest.

The news scurried back into the castle. Menservants, maidservants and retainers approached

the visitor. Their faces revealed their curiosity. Don Benizio dismounted and straightened his body, jumped and bent from three hours of furious galloping. Head high and body erect, he passed through the doorway, fixing his grave and penetrating gaze upon the throng of men and women who composed Claudia's court. The group parted to permit horse and rider to pass, as Don Benizio, with deep voice and studied gesture, intoned:

"Peace be with you!"

The servants and the courtiers responded with a bow to the Christian salute. Then Don Benizio inquired:

"Claudia is in the castle?"

"Yes," replied Rachele, Claudia's faithful maidservant. "Do you wish me, your Reverence, to announce your arrival?"

"Thank you."

Don Benizio consigned the horse to a stable-boy and waited. The men and women went back to their work. The castle entrance and the courtyard became silent again. From time to time the pigeons swooped down from the turrets to pick up seeds of grain from the window-sills and from the crevices of the walls.

Don Benizio strolled underneath the romanesque loggetta. He was worried by a question which had not occurred to him before. Should he address her as Madonna or as Signora? It seemed to him that the success of his enterprise depended on a gracious gesture, a happy word, upon some trifle or other.

His meditation did not last long.

"Madonna Claudia awaits you."

Rachele stepped aside to permit the prelate to pass, and bowed as he disappeared. Don Benizio traversed a short corridor, at the end of which a rectangle of light indicated a door. He rearranged his vestments. Then he entered.

Claudia was awaiting him, seated upon one of those antique heavy arm-chairs, with high backs and exaggeratedly large arms, which formed part of the inherited furniture of noble families. She was clothed in a white tunic which fell in ample folds to the ground. Around her bare neck was a collar of pink pearls. To the exquisitely white face, not yet touched by any sign of age, the profound black eyes lent light, expression, beauty.

The room was in no wise remarkable. On the walls were ranged in long rows portraits of illustrious personages—ecclesiastics and soldiers. Dark red curtains protected the chamber from the heat and the noonday sun. A single ray of sunlight penetrated through them and fell upon a table covered with a design of alternating blue and white squares.

Don Benizio bowed profoundly, almost touching his nose on his knees. Then he raised his gaze to the lady. Claudia appeared to him noble and solemn as a queen.

He became confused in his choice of words. The timidity of an obstinate lover, deluded yet supported by a secret hope, bound his tongue and his expression. Once again he felt himself a slave

of that fatal beauty, sweet to pluck like forbidden fruit; fragrant, intoxicating and tragic like the blood flowing from a crime of passion.

And Claudia received him without showing a sign of fear!

She dared, then, to confront the enemy! She even wished to! She was facing him to finish him! In the combat of love, Claudia, like a matron of the circus, was turning her thumb downwards on the vanquished.

Don Benizio advanced a few steps, bowed once more, and was about to speak when Claudia cut short his preamble.

"I can imagine," she said, "the purpose of your journey, and although your move is nothing but the consequence of plots against me, I wished to receive you, and to accord you my hospitality. I shall listen to you if you will be brief and prudent."

"Signora, since you feel that any introduction is out of place, I shall tell you directly the motives which have brought me here....."

Claudia indicated a chair. Don Benizio seated himself, gathering his vestments and his cloak between his knees. The proximity of the woman perturbed him. His eyes flashed sinisterly, his cheeks reddened and his jaws contracted. His whole countenance was contorted into a satanic grimace.

"I have been commissioned by the honourable Chapter of the Cathedral to fulfil this my delicate mission, one which I would not have accepted had it not been imposed upon me as a duty.....You, O Signora, who for weeks have been residing in

this enchanting castle, are not apprised of the affairs of the Principate."

Claudia listened and noticed with curious eyes how the priest strove to appear tranquil and to repress his inner agitation.

"Perhaps, Don Benizio, you are mistaken. But I do not wish to interrupt you."

"Whether or not you are informed of it, it is a fact, Signora, that never during the secular dominion of the Madruzzo has there come upon our poor land days as sad as those we are now experiencing. The reins of power are in the hands of your father, the Aulic Council threatens to invoke foreign intervention; and no later than yesterday the Chapter of the Cathedral decided to write to the Pope and the Emperor, confiding to these supreme authorities the destinies of the Principate. The people are manifesting their discontent without reserve. And need I say.....?"

"Speak on. I am listening calmly."

"Universal hatred has been concentrated on you. Since it became known that the Cardinal had presented you with the Palace in Prato di Fiera at Trent the revolt has been creeping and spreading among the poorer classes, astutely incited by your enemies."

"Among them, yourself!"

"No, Claudia. I have had the power to do you injury in the past. I have even had the desire to do so.....But you know why. I love you with a love which has not died and will never die. You rejected me, and the anguish of the repulse

aroused in me the longing for impossible forms of vengeance. But to-day, Claudia, Mia Signora, I come to offer you my services, my protection. The Chapter of the Cathedral has commissioned me to persuade or compel you to abandon the territory of the Principate, at least for a certain time. Your absence would calm the popular passions and would exorcise the perils which threaten us. But I do not desire to have you depart even for a moment. I am prepared to betray my mandate, to defend you before the Chapter, to rehabilitate you before the people, if you, my good Claudia, will make the dream come true which I have so long treasured in my heart. You know it. You can do it."

This impassioned oration did not move Claudia, who maintained her statuesque rigidity. In any case, it was but a repetition of an old manoeuvre—one more attempt, perhaps the last, on the part of an exasperated lover.

The excited Don Benizio, his breast heaving, his eyes gleaming, was waiting some miraculous effect of his words. Claudia chilled him.

"You are telling me nothing new," she said. "I have known for some time that my lord the Cardinal is opposed by unfeeling and implacable enemies. Nor am I unaware that the hatred of the lower classes and of the ecclesiastics converges upon me. Those who find words of indulgence and pardon for Emanuel find for me nothing but lies and calumnies. Your own case interests me but little. The persistence of your affections is certainly re-

markable, but I am obliged to tell you that I shall never debase myself to realize a single one of your dreams. At Trent they are saying that I am a sorceress, a courtesan. But I nave never practised sorcery, and I have remained faithful to one man. Many married women cannot say as much. You tempt me, but I am not frail like your penitents. You propose to make peace with me after conquering me with infamous weapons. You crave the kiss of pardon and you are prepared to take revenge.

"No, no, Don Benizio. Convince yourself of it once and for all. Claudia Particella is too proud to dispense her favours to every one."

"I but propose to you the remedy for the evil."

"This remedy of yours presupposes the destruction of my dignity. I cannot accept it."

"And who will protect you against the revolt?" demanded Don Benizio. "Do you wish me to unleash the tempest?"

"Unleash it, if you can."

"It is imminent, Claudia."

"I have loved, I have lived. I am still young. I shall know how to die."

"The blinded people will drag your body through the streets, in mud, in shame."

"No matter. Ignominy can be a triumph. The people are blind, like all simple folk. They love and hate without discernment. They sacrifice their victims only to mourn and adore them when the hour of bestial fanaticism has ceased."

Don Benizio, seeing that his cause was lost,

clutched at his last weapons.

"You reject me, Signora, and I feel that it is for ever. But you will not triumph for long. This castle will shelter you yet a little while. You have sacrificed a maiden who will become the symbol of revolt."

"Whom?" demanded Claudia, losing her calm for the first time. "Whom?"

"Filiberta!"

"What has happened to her?"

"She died in the convent."

Claudia made no sign. Don Benizio added rapidly:

"No one knows of the end of Filiberta. She was buried by night, without ceremony and without honours, in the crypt beneath the church. That was two months ago. But yesterday the mystery was revealed. The Count di Castelnuovo is plotting vengeance. The people will arise.....Oh, why, Claudia, do you want the shrill wind to overwhelm you when I offer you an island of safety, when I promise to use every effort to assure you a future free from peril? Think again, Signora, and decide more wisely."

"It is useless to prolong this conversation. No one, in good faith, dreams of holding me responsible for the death of Filiberta. And if destiny decrees that I must expiate even the sins which I have not committed, I shall accept my fate without fear and without remorse. I renounce your protection. I prefer your hostility to a friendship offered for selfish ends."

"Then I am constrained to demand, in the name of the Chapter of the Cathedral, in the name of the interests of the Church and of the Principate, that you leave the Trentino. Too long have you been a cause of scandal and a source of misfortune. For the welfare of your soul you will obey the orders of the Church. Depart before the vengeance of God manifests itself to your destruction!"

At these words Claudia arose. The flames of her wrath reddened her cheeks. With outstretched finger she pointed to the door and said to the humiliated and enraged priest:

"Go, councillor of perfidy! Return to Trent and tell your colleagues of the Cathedral that Claudia, daughter of Ludovico Particella, obeys but one on this earth: Emanuel Madruzzo, Prince Bishop of Trent."

Don Benizio's failure could not have been more disastrous. Claudia refused to obey the injunctions of the Chapter of the Cathedral and disdained to stoop to crooked bargains with its ambassador. The priest arose from the chair upon which he had seemed to be nailed. He was trembling. The wrinkles on his forehead had become deeper, his eyes were filled with tears.

Don Benizio wept like a boy. And like a boy he knelt at Claudia's feet. With broken phrases interrupted by terrible groans which burst from his breast, with words which were in turn puerile, disordered, suave, and terrible, with the desperate gestures of one who has been crushed, he begged love, pardon, pity.

"Do not cast me into the abyss. Do not make me drain the bitter cup of vengeance. Cast a ray of your light into my darkened soul."

Then phrases of mystic adoration hurtled past his lips.

"I will build you a secret altar in the depths of my conscience. You will be the Madonna of the temple within me. I will be your slave. Strike me, despise me, beat me, open my veins with a subtle dagger, but grant me the revelation of yourself, grant that I may speak to you, grant that I may lose myself with you in the supreme illusion."

But Don Benizio's eloquence did not move Claudia. Then the priest returned to thoughts of vengeance.

"Ah, you do not listen to me, shameless courtesan, harlot. Well, I shall come to get you in this same castle. I shall let the common brutes of the market-place satiate their idle lusts on your sinful body. You shall be the mockery of the unreasoning mob. Your corpse will not have the rites of Christian burial. You will not be cast into the field of the Badia with the witches. And when the hour of your agony comes, when, trampled on, transfixed and rent by the blows of the mob, you shall implore aid and succour with the eyes which now so disdainfully regard me, I shall be the evil demon of that supreme hour, I shall come to torture you with memories of me, to gloat in my triumph."

"Go! Go! If the present escapes you, console yourself with visions of the future—

Rachele! Rachele!" Claudia called.

The faithful maidservant appeared. Don Benizio arose rapidly, put his clothes in order, assumed an expression of composure. He shot a last glance at Claudia, erect beside the armchair. He uttered no word of farewell. He made straight for the stables.

He felt the need of releasing somehow the terrific tension of his nerves. He seized the whip and began to beat the horse furiously. At the first blow the horse raised its ears and opened wide its almost human eyes. Then it hurled itself against the manger, neighed terrifically, showing its double row of yellow teeth, and tried to break its halter-cord by violent leaps backwards. The whip continued to hiss while flagellating the skin. The horse had recognized the master and did not kick. It only stamped furiously as though begging mercy. The other horses ceased to eat and stretched their necks. Their nostrils swelled with anger and in their eyes gleamed tears of desperation. The stable boy motionless in the doorway looked on, silent and amazed, at the insane explosion of the priest. Don Benizio saw him. He felt a touch of shame. He let drop the whip and threw himself at the horse's head. He caressed it, smoothed its mane, called it pet names. He led it from the stall.

Arrived in the courtyard he mounted in the saddle. He shot one glance upwards. Claudia stood in the window leaning against the romanesque railing and talking with Rachele.

Don Benizio made a sign of farewell with a

grimace and a grotesque gesture. Claudia did not respond.

She heard the trotting of his horse along the paved road, then the gallop. From the window of the tower she observed the departure of her guest. Don Benizio passed down the road like the shadow of a fleeing cloud. The peasants hardly dared to look at him. He seemed a demon just escaped from hell to take captive a human soul.

CHAPTER V

The sun was still high. Don Benizio stopped in a village for his afternoon rest. After tying his horse to the bars of a window he entered an inn. The room was empty. The clients were in the fields or the woods intent upon their daily tasks.

In the unlighted fireplace, huge like those generally found in mountain houses, two children were romping among the ashes. At the back, behind a rough-hewn table, a middle-aged woman bent over her work—the mending of a heap of old discoloured rags. There were but two long fir-wood tables and four benches in the room.

Don Benizio set to reflecting on the events of that illstarred day of battle. The silence of the summer afternoon was disturbed only by the low buzzing of flies. Now and then a heaped manure cart passed by. The peasants peered into the inn, astonished to see in it a new and unexpected client.

At a certain point Don Benizio asked himself:

"What about going to visit the parish priest?"

He tried to remember who was the guardian of souls in that village. This effort of memory brought a bit of order back into his brain.

"Oh, that boring old imbecile, Don Tobia

Privatelli. He is old and has a serving woman who is simply mummified. I'll stay here."

And he called for another mug of wine. The sweet liquor had the property of reconciling him with himself, with the world, with Claudia.

The languor of unconscious intoxication spread through his veins. He repeated his order. The hostess made a grimace of surprise. She must be an old bigot, ignorant of ecclesiastical customs. The priests of that epoch drank and ate copiously, and even, when opportunity offered, danced. As well-fed ministers of God, they had incorporated into their morality the notion of physical pleasure, sensual, even orgiastic. They applied, wrong and foremost, the teachings of Epicurus. The Council of Trent had not reformed the depraved customs of the lower clergy. Corruption spread from the Vatican throughout the Catholic world to the very last parish hidden away among the mountains. Few indeed escaped the pestilential contagion; the days of the asceticism which flourished in the eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth centuries were gone for ever. The Academies grew up like mushrooms, and with the Academies came superficiality of belief. Falsity of spiritual attitude and lust for material enjoyment had taken the place of the antique ideal of meditation, study, solitude and penitence.

Don Benizio ordered a fourth mug of wine. The fumes of the alcohol were now beginning pleasantly to becloud his brain. Things appeared to him under new, confused, fantastic aspects. He felt the need of talking and moving. His gloom

had disappeared. He remembered that he had not yet touched food.

"Wine will take the place of bread," he said to himself. He swallowed still another mug of wine and prepared to pay the score over at the table behind which the head of the padrona, bent over her work, was but barely visible.

Then he stopped. His priestly attention had been drawn to a poor Christ sculptured in oak, which was hanging on the hood of the fire-place. The crucifix must have been very old. The thorns of the crown were nearly all broken off; one of the arms hung from the nail by which it was fixed to the cross as though seeking to touch the wound in the side; the feet were minus several toes. The person of the Redeemer presented a miserable appearance. The flies had adorned it with interminable rows of autograph signatures, and the smoke of firewood and tobacco pipes had blackened it.

At the sight of it Don Benizio became furious. What a profanation!—and the wine exalted him still more.

"Why do you keep that Christ on the fire-place?" he demanded of the little woman. At the sound of his angry voice she seemed about to swoon away.

"Do you think it is an image to be exposed to the gaze of your clients?"

The hostess, pale with fear, did not reply.

Don Benizio, perhaps unconsciously, was taking his revenge by terrifying a woman.

"And do you imagine that this is the way to

gain paradise! Viler than the beasts of the field! You will be hurled to the lowest circle of all the infernos."

At this Satanic evocation the hostess made the sign of the cross.

Don Benizio, at the mercy of the alcoholic fumes, insisted:

"Turn that dirty piece of wood against the wall. Let Jesus not see your idiotic faces and let Him not know of your turpitude."

The woman hesitated. The children had stopped their playing and were gazing fixedly at the priest.

"Turn that Christ against the wall, or else take Him away from there. This is not the place for sacred images. Put an ass up there, and draw pictures of goats on the walls—understand me?—enormous goats—goats as big as the bestiality of your clients."

The hostess, who had not yet opened her mouth, climbed on the hearth and obeyed. Christ turned His worm-eaten back on the bystanders.

For the priest's noisy wrath had attracted a little group of persons who took their station at the doorway of the inn. Not daring to enter, they expressed their wonder with grimaces and rapid gestures.

Don Benizio paid his bill, dashed out of the room, mounted his horse and galloped off. The padrona, still trembling, peered out of the door-way to observe his departure, and crossed herself with the superstitious devotion of one who believes

in the devil. The peasants remained with wide-open mouths and regarded the mysterious horseman with terrified eyes as he disappeared down the street, leaving behind him a cloud of dust.

CHAPTER VI

When Don Benizio entered the valley of the Adige the first shades of night were descending on the river. The towers of Trent, with their indented turrets and their subtle spires, were profiled against the evening sky, glittering with many-coloured metal as though embraced by a huge serpent. Don Benizio looked long at the castle and at the huge tower rising above it. He slowed down his horse to a walk. The evening breeze undulated the tops of the poplar trees which lined the Adige. The river was turbid and overflowing with the melting of the Alpine snows. The clear air vibrated to the sound of the church bells. The chirruping swallows swooped down in great curves to graze the surface of the water or the tips of the mountain trees. From the fields came the first harmonies of the great hymn of peace which myriads of insects, hidden in the grass, raise nightly to the stars.

It was close to midnight when Don Benizio crossed the bridge of San Lorenzo. The wooden pavement of the seven arches reverberated under the iron shoes of the horse. The intoxication from the wine had vanished. Don Benizio was once more an official personage. He was in an indescribable state of physical and moral exhaustion.

Before going to bed he asked himself: "Did those peasants recognize me?"

He slept heavily, tormented by the image of Claudia and by dreams of revenge. For two days he did not emerge from his room, alleging a headache. He was writing a report on his mission for the prior of the Cathedral Chapter.

On the evening of the second day of repose a messenger from the Cardinal appeared, inviting him to call early the next day at the castle.

Don Benizio entered the castle at the stipulated hour. The courtyard was filled with the mob of needy persons held in check by a squadron of suzzi armed with halberds. In the ante-chambers and in the corridors priests, knights, lawyers, servants and soldiers crowded, twisted and jostled. Many bowed as Don Benizio appeared and were amazed at seeing in his gait the sign of unexpected old age. Several spoke of this to their neighbours, and all concluded that Don Benizio must be seriously sick.

The Cardinal had been awaiting him in the private audience chamber. When Don Benizio entered, he was not a little surprised to find himself face to face with Ludovico Particella, intent on the reading of some papers. The three personages exchanged but a few chill words of formal courtesy. Their faces betrayed the gravity of the questions which preoccupied them.

Emanuel Madruzzo began in an outwardly calm voice:

"Each time that I am obliged to assert my princely authority to punish in some manner those

who have served me, the sentiment of gratitude fights a bitter combat in my soul with the sentiments of duty and justice. I should like to live without being obliged to punish. But my desire remains Platonic in face of the malevolence of men. One may not always pardon, especially when the guilty one is conscious of the acts which he commits. (This exordium was not necessary).

"All men know me; and you, Don Benizio, know me better than the others, you who have been entrusted with the most delicate missions at my hands, you who have been my counsellor, my secretary and my companion.

"But from to-day you lose all right to my confidence. From to-day you cease to belong to my family, my court—I had almost said to my people."

Don Benizio listened impassibly, his arms crossed upon his breast. His cheeks were livid. He kept his eye fixed upon the great silver cross which gleamed upon the black velvet mantle of the Cárdinal.

"The measure with which you chastise me, O my lord," said Don Benizio, "causes me profound sorrow. But I am resigned, as every obedient servant, every good Christian, should be. Permit me, nevertheless, to ask the motives for your action."

All this was spoken in a humble tone. The Cardinal continued:

"Your equivocal conduct has long impressed me. For some years I have been observing and studying you, and at times I have been forced to

admire the ingenuousness with which you have been able to serve two masters, God and the devil; and to balance two contradictory interests, two hostile passions."

This disturbed Don Benizio, and his cheeks turned scarlet. "You have been playing your comedy with finesse. But as time passed I was able to discern the less noble sides of your nature. I was aware of the calumnies which you disseminated concerning me and a lady whom I love profoundly. I was not ignorant of the manoeuvres with which you sought to bring discord into my family and into my immediate circle. I had knowledge of your endeavours, of your demands, and of your mishaps. Yet I tolerated you."

"Because I was useful to you," interrupted Don Benizio.

"Useful, perhaps," replied the Cardinal, "but not indispensable. I tolerated you to preserve the peace, to avoid scandals touching my private life. I sought to disarm you with my charity and indulgence. I was aware that my efforts were vain. Passion blinded you and filled your heart with hatred. Recently you have conspired with my worst enemies. You hate me always. You must find it logical if in self-defence I send you away and deprive you of your weapons."

Don Benizio arose:

"I have no desire to exculpate myself, my lord, and I accept your sentence without discussing it. But time will show that I was right."

"Be seated! Be seated!" commanded Ema-

nuel. "I have not finished."

He pushed the chair back from the table, opened the drawer, and drew from it a dagger, a sabre and a knife.

"Do you recognize these weapons?"

Don Benizio looked at them and replied: "Yes. The dagger has been mine ever since you gave it to me."

"But I did not give it to you to use for criminal purposes."

The priest reddened.

"And this sword belongs to whom?"

"I do not know. Permit me not to say."

"Do you recall where you left these weapons?"

"In the Church of the Holy Trinity."

"Do you recall the purposes for which you went by night to the convent?"

"Yes. To clear up a mystery."

"To profane a tomb."

"Which you yourself had previously opened."

"Be silent! I command you to hold your tongue. Respect my niece and the dead which do not concern you."

"Filiberta belonged to the people, to all of us, to the man who wished to make her his wife. You killed her. It is said in the town that you poisoned her."

At these words the Cardinal leapt to his feet. His aspect was threatening. He shook his fists at Don Benizio, who had risen and held his arm crossed upon his breast. Ludovico Particella, who had followed the colloquy in silence, inter-

vened to calm the two prelates.

"It is you—you, Don Benizio—who dares to throw in my face this infamous calumny! It is you and your accomplice who have spread the rumour. I, poisoner of Filiberta! I, who owe to my gentleness of character a whole train of misfortunes great and small. Shameless one!"

With a violent motion he struck a bell which stood on the table. The valet appeared.

"Two guards. Immediately!"

Don Benizio showed no sign of agitation. Only his mouth twisted itself into a sneer of infernal irony, and pronounced, in measured syllables, these words:

"I expected imprisonment. But do you imagine that in this way you can silence my voice? You are mistaken."

The guards appeared. Emanuel Madruzzo commanded:

"Conduct Don Benizio to the secret dungeon of the castle!"

On the threshold the priest stopped, turned around and cried:

"Your star, O Cardinal Madruzzo, is about to set. Your hour is about to strike."

"Go! Go! mischievous prophet of evil! It is most probable that you will not hear the striking of my destined hour."

Don Benizio crossed the ante-chamber and descended the stairway with head erect. The emotion aroused by his arrest was visible in the faces of the courtiers and prelates who had been

awaiting Ludovico Particella, and had already begun to besiege him for news. The councillor did not satisfy the exasperated curiosity of the crowd. He replied laconically that information would be forthcoming the next day. He retired into the hall of the Aulic Council, which suspended its session in order to receive an urgent communication from the Cardinal.

Don Benizio was private secretary to Emanuel Madruzzo and the Aulic Council had no call to concern itself with the question. Ludovico Particella believed, nevertheless, that it was wise to explain the circumstances of the affair. At the news of the death of Filiberta the Council became grave. It finally ratified the decisions of the Cardinal in regard to Don Benizio. Then it declared the session ended and dispersed.

The faces of the councillors betrayed a single spontaneous presentiment: The death of Filiberta would precipitate a crisis, unleash a tempest, and bring the clouds of death over the land.

CHAPTER VII

At the extremity of the Moat of San Simonino, near the via-Lunga, beneath one of those arches which by night take on the appearance of one of Dante's caverns, there existed, at the period in which occurred the events which we are narrating, a tavern of the meanest sort, which bore above the door the Latin phrase: "Taberna est.'.

The habitues were the residents of the quarter, artisans who worked in the tiny shops of the suburbs, small tradesmen and itinerant merchants. It was a noisy and dangerous clientele, especially after the abundant Sunday libations.

To the tavern there came frequently a certain Cima, an improvising poet and roving minstrel, a mysterious yet impressive personage, of pungent speech and heady hands. He had sojourned with many noble Italian families, and had lived some time at the court of the Madruzzo. He was familiar with the chronicles old and new, and was accustomed to make a great impression with his erudition gained at first hand from the lords of the day, great and small.

When he entered the first of the two smoky rooms which comprised the ground floor of the tavern, many of the guests arose, greeted him and offered him a glass. The tavern-keeper, a fat old

man with an opulent beard, welcomed him with a friendly gesture.

Cima was one of the most influential chiefs of the party in opposition to the Madruzzo and the Particella. A facile speaker, full of witticisms and resonant phrases, he had retained from his career of roving jester certain chosen gesticulations and grimaces. He often indulged in a defence of the profession which had given familiarity with great and had permitted him to live without acquiring calloused hands. He was wont to say that the princes had need of the wit of buffoons as a lamp has need of oil to make it burn.

He despised the great men of the earth. He had seen them too close at hand. He cherished against them the animosity of the liberated slave.

A few hours after the arrest of Don Benizio, the tavern of the Moat of San Simonino was filled with customers. On Saturday one drinks more readily. All the habitual clients, and many besides, sat at the tables before flasks which were rapidly drained. Their talk was noisy, and their fists pounding on the table made the bottles and empty glasses clatter.

"They poisoned her! I tell you they poisoned her!" Yelled a shoemaker who had forgotten to take off his apron. "No, no. She died of consumption," replied a chimney-sweep still black with soot.

"Then why," asked the first, "did they try to make a secret of Filiberta's death? Isn't that the best proof that there was a crime committed?

Do you suppose that the imprisoning of Don Benizio has no connection with the death of Filiberta? I hope your simplicity won't become absolute imbecility. It is the Count di Castelnuovo who let out the secret."

The host thought it best at this point to intervene and gravely rendered judgment:

"One must not assert things that haven't been proved."

Cima entered and interrupted the discussion. He, too, was excited over the stories which were spreading through the city. The death of Filiberta, young, beautiful, innocent, had spread consternation among the people. From street to street, from door to door, from mouth to mouth, the tragic news had leapt, exciting indignation and commiseration. The arrest of Don Benizio filled the cup to overflowing. Men leaving the taverns exchanged opinions and parted, rending the air with threatening gestures. The streets were silent, deserted. It was the moment for the spark which would ignite the conflagration.

Cima's arrival in the tavern restored calm for a few minutes. Every one wanted detailed news. He alone could explain the enigma, reveal the mystery.

But Cima, after responding distractedly to the collective welcome, wormed himself into a corner of the room to drink undisturbed and listen to the conversation of the others. The talk began again. The death of Filiberta was the impassioned theme of every discourse.

The sentimentality of the mob exploded. Some attacked without reserve the authority of the Cardinal. Others accused him of incapacity to rule the destinies of the Principate. All were agreed in blaming Claudia, the sorceress, the harlot, the Cleopatra in minor form. It was she who had caused the arrest of Don Benizio and the ruin of Trent! Not a single voice was raised in defence of the recluse of Castel Toblino.

Bestial proposals, obscene phrases hurtled in the turbid atmosphere of the wine-room. The mass gave courage to the individuals. And all the ancient rancours came again to the surface. Misery found release in apostrophes of malediction.

"Yes," cried an old man, with a face like a crazy triangle, "We have been suffering for thirty years. Our hunger is the consequence of the Council of Trent which they held in our city. They bled us white, and now our governors are trampling on us."

A full century had elapsed since the Council of Trent, but the legend of the event remained in the minds of the citizens with all the vividness of a memory.

"The cardinals banqueted while the miserable prisoners of the Pie di Castello were dying of hunger," said Cima, the expert in local history.

"Cristoforo Madruzzo served fifty-pound sturgeons and hundred-year-old wine to the papal legates. On the third feast of Easter, in 1545, they banqueted riotously for full four hours beneath a baldachin of gold, devouring seventy-four courses."

At this news people's mouths opened wide in wonder. Cima, suddenly recovering his natural vein of loquacity, continued:

"I perceive that these facts astonish you. You are profoundly ignorant of the past, even of the recent past. Well, permit me to increase your astonishment.

"At another banquet offered by the Cardinal Cristoforo Madruzzo to the priests of Rome, there were consumed ninety pairs of chickens, twenty pairs of capons, forty of ducks, thirty of sparrows, half a stag, twenty-five pairs of rabbits, two and a half calves, two wether sheep, half an ox, a hundred and fifty melons, eight goats, and condiments to infinity. I beg to be excused from telling you how many bottles of wine were emptied by these worthy gentry who had come to our city with the intention of bringing the Church back to its primitive frugality, simplicity and evangelical abstinence.

"These dates are indelibly graven upon my memory. Our habitual sufferings and the misery which pursues the people of Trent, are but the logical consequence of a century of continuous and incredible waste. The ever-rising taxes under which we suffer are no longer sufficient to replenish the treasury of the Principate."

Cima was not exaggerating. Perhaps even he did not know the worst. The court of the Madruzzo rivalled the imperial courts in luxury and magnificence. The priests who frequented it were gay viveurs who occupied themselves little enough with sacred matters. Theology divided them, but

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gluttony united them. Every banquet was an orgiastic jubilation of the belly. The chroniclers of the epoch have passed on to us a list—compiled with a statistical exactitude worthy of all praise—of the banquets, feasts and all-night balls. Even the priests in their cassocks sacrificed to Terpsichore, goddess of the dance.

"After a most sumptuous supper which Cristoforo Madruzzo gave in the castle to celebrate the marriage of a relative, the ball commenced. Gentlemen and bishops joined in. Papal legates approved of the dancing, and one of them, the Cardinal di Monte, expressed his regret that his gout prevented him from taking part. Another Cardinal, Polo, added that the dancing did not seem to him improper, and that he approved of kissing, provided it was done with 'the utmost modesty and Christian charity.' Only Cervini vigorously disapproved of the prelates who passed their time in 'jumping and dancing' instead of setting an example of Christian conduct. Such were the personal customs of the reformers of Catholicism."

The orator of the Tavern of the Moat was therefore right in attributing the remote cause of the present troubles to the dissipation of the public wealth which occurred during the Council. The Principate of Trent had too small an income to support a numerous court of ecclesiastics without risking economic bankruptcy and moral ruin. The last Madruzzo was perhaps paying the penalty for his predecessors' misdeeds.

But there were other and more recent causes for

complaint. The memory of the pest of 1630 was not yet obliterated from the minds of the survivors. Another client of the tavern, itinerant tinker named Anacleto Roselli, had lived in those sad days in which death had taken its harvest with a broad and reckless scythe. The first case of the pest was noted in the Borgo Nuovo. Then the contagion spread rapidly in all quarters of the city. No fewer than 2,382 persons died, 1,242 in the city and 1,140 in the hospital of the Badia.

"When the pestilence was raging, what was our Cardinal Prince and Bishop doing?" demanded the tinker in a loud voice. "Do you suppose he stayed in the city to bring comfort to the afflicted, bread to the hungering, asylum to the survivors? No. He preferred to save his skin, and courageously retreated to his castle of Nano, in Anannia, to await the end of the scourge."

"And he returned," Cima finished for him, "not to repair his fortunes through hard work and wise governing, but to make love to Claudia Particella, to make his amours a public scandal, to draw the cardinal's purple through the mud of old women's gossip, to cause the death of his niece Filiberta in a convent, to throw Don Benizio into prison, and to give houses to his Claudia, who today can boast of owning the palace in Campo di Fiera."

A sudden general exclamation of surprise and indignation interrupted Cima.

"Yes, do not be astonished. The daughter of Ludovico Particella has beauty, witchery and

caprice as her courtiers. She wants what she wants. She despoils us. She starves us. It is not the first time that a woman has brought a people to misery and a princely house to ruin."

Cima was talking with brutal frankness. His nature and his former connection with the princely houses gave him the air of knowing what he was talking about. Yet he felt that he had overshot the mark and added:

"What I am telling you is perhaps new to you who are resigned to misery, but it is old to all those who hope and reason, those who are to-day asking themselves if the moment has not come to shake off the yoke. And anyway, it is nothing to me if what I say reaches the Cardinal's ears. The truth is the truth, even for princes."

He sat down and drained his glass. The others imitated him. Then each guest commenced to discuss the matter with his neighbours. The voices became harsh and the general attitude threatening.

The clientele of the tavern represented the poorest classes, excitable, impulsive, sentimental. They are the classes which patiently endure economic slavery without protest and then burst into revolt over some moral issue. These men were the descendants of thè inhabitants of Trent who, in 1407, rebelled under the leadership of Rodolfo Bellenzani, Referendary of the People, and who, in 1435, compelled Alexander di Mazzovia, regent of the Bishopric, to come to terms. In their veins ran the blood of the forefathers who, in 1275,

at the tocsin of La Renga, courageously expelled Ezzelino da Romano, "the terror of peoples and princes." The Latin blood could not but reveal itself. A tragic hour was about to sound in the history of the city.

The people were on the verge of revolt not to demand anything definite, but to compel the government and the Cardinal to reflect upon a situation which was daily growing more critical. All the clients of the tavern, all the artisans of the inner city, many of the nobility, and certain of the ecclesiastics, were convinced of the imminence of a popular convulsion.

Towards midnight the crowd in the tavern began to disperse. When the bell sounded the rooms became empty, and all returned to their homes.

CHAPTER VIII

In the early hours of the next day, Sunday, the city presented no unusual aspect. The usual crowd thronged the streets in holiday attire on their way to attend service in the various churches. But the demeanour of the men and women was grave. As they left the churches it was not the customary cheerful conversation which was heard, but mere brief words of greeting.

The previous night, exactly when, in the Tavern of the Moat of San Simonino, the secular dominion of the Madruzzo was facing trial at the bar of the people, another meeting was being held in the villa of the Count di Castelnuovo, situated on the other side of the Fersina, close to the Rovereto Highway. At this secret meeting there were present several knights of noble blood, friends of the Count, and two ecclesiastics representing the Chapter of the Cathedral, which had not yet decided in what manner to intervene in the matter of Don Benizio's arrest.

The discussion had been long and animated. Two lines of policy were contending one with another. The one was represented by the Count di Castelnuovo and his impulsive companions, and the other by the older persons present and by the prelates, who had grown circumspect by long ex-

perience in politics.

The first wished to assault the Castle, massacring, if necessary, the suzzi and the garrison; then to arrest the Cardinal and Ludovico Particella, declaring both relieved of their respective offices; then to form a provisional committee of regency and place the final settlement of the affairs of the Principate in the hands of the Emperor and of the Papacy. At the same time they were to cause the imprisonment of Claudia and draw up the accusation against her, demanding the penalty of death.

The others rejected the proposal of an armed assault on the castle. They did not believe it useful or prudent to arrest the Cardinal, the more because the Chapter of the Cathedral had already sent memorials concerning him to the Pope and Emperor. They agreed as to the desirability of organizing a popular demonstration for the following evening. The crowd would go to the castle and demand the dismissal of Ludovico Particella and the exile of Claudia. This party prevailed. It was decided that the demonstration would begin on the termination of the vesper services in the Church of Saint Peter.

In this church the larger portion of the Sunday afternoon crowd was wont to gather. In the morning the ecclesiastics who were opposing the house of the Madruzzo put in their time preparing the scheduled events. The Chapter of the Cathedral held its final session to draw up definite plans. The Count di Castelnuovo informed his relatives of the plan and summoned those of his friends and

followers who inhabited the valley sections. The rumour spread and reached the ears of the Cardinal, who considered it prudent to transfer his domicile to the palace of the Albere.

The defence of the castle and the maintenance of public order were in the hands of the Captain of the City, Baron Ottavio di Grestal, an energetic man, well able to confront and dominate critical situations. The service in Saint Peter's passed off in perfect order. Among the worshippers were nearly all the clients of the tavern and numerous groups of knights, recognizable by their fringed velvet mantles. The liturgical sonority of the singers' voice, accompanied by the organ, filled the temple, illuminated by the yellow flames of the candles which burned on the altars, and by the rays of light which filtered through the windows. From time to time the crowd knelt and bowed their heads. And the choral responses had the solemnity of the prayers which the Crusaders raised before battle to the God of the Christians.

The doors opened and the crowd thronged into the streets. A single cry echoed:

"To Piazza di Fiera! To Piazza di Fiera!"

After the first astonishment there was a moment of indescribable confusion. Many women drew aside in dismay and hastened their steps homeward. Others threw themselves into the midst of the throng to dissuade their husbands, their fathers, their brothers. And there were some who joined the procession.

At the head was a group of knights led by

Count Antonio di Castelnuovo, who believed the moment arrived to avenge Filiberta. Then followed a crowd of varied ages and conditions, all unarmed. The priests had remained in the canonical residence. Even before news of the uprising had reached the Castle, the procession had invaded Piazza di Fiera.

Here new cries of vengeance echoed:

"Death to the Particella! To the stake with Claudia! Death to the assassins of Filiberta!"

The wrath which had so long been fermenting in the soul of the people now exploded with the violence of a destroying tempest. The more excitable hurled themselves against the palace door. They wished to demolish that "love token," an insult to the miserable folk who slept in the squalid garrets of the Pie di Castello.

Meanwhile the revolt was spreading throughout the city. From the quarters of San Benedetto, of San Pietro, of Santa Maria and of Borgo Nuovo, other groups of citizens arrived to join the manifestations of Piazza di Fiera. The windows of the palace were by now shattered. The portal was on the point of giving way beneath the fury of the attackers, when the Captain of the City, Baron di Grestal, arrived with a large squadron of suzzi. They threw themselves on the mob, whirling their iron-bound staves, cracking the heads of those who delayed flight.

The clamour ceased as though by miracle. There was a terrible pause, a moment of tragic silence. The mob withdrew into the street of San

Vigilio and invaded the square of the Cathedral. This was immediately isolated and surrounded by a cordon of suzzi, who preserved the menacing demeanour of men prepared for violence. The crowd was crammed into one compact mass. Their spirits fluttered in expectation of another attack. A knight pressed forward and prepared to harangue the multitude.

It was the Count Antonio di Castelnuovo who by this discourse, was about to assume full responsibility for what might happen.

"Citizens," he said, "if this manifestation is not to pass unobserved, but is to obtain the results you desire, it is necessary to send men who enjoy confidence to place your complaints before the Prince Emanuel Madruzzo. Our lord has retired to the Palace of the Albere. It is there that he must be sought and informed of what the people desire."

A cry arose which drowned the knight's voice: "The release of Don Benizio! The exile of Claudia! The people demand naught else."

"Very well," continued Antonio di Castelnuovo, "name your ambassadors and do not move from this place until you have received the reply."

As though with one voice the crowd named the Count and two of his companions, known to the people for their courageous acts. The three marched through the crowd and departed in the direction of the Cardinal's temporary residence.

The Cardinal, apprised of the demonstration by a series of messengers, had immediately summoned Ludovico Particella to his side. With his

trusted councillor he was awaiting the development and outcome of events.

He was walking up and down the courtyard of the palace when one of the halberdiers of the gate came to announce the arrival of the mission headed by the Count di Castelnuovo.

Emanuel went back to his study and called for Ludovico Particella. Then he ordered his squires to accompany the three knights to his presence. In a few moments the curtain before the study door was withdrawn. The three representatives of the rebellious people bowed profoundly and remained standing. The Cardinal regarded them with cold eyes. He knew the Count di Castelnuovo. He remembered having seen the two others. He made a sign with one hand and said:

"Speak. I am listening."

The Count advanced a step. He lifted his white forehead, crowned with a mass of raven-black hair, and glared at the Cardinal, whose flashing black eyes revealed a soul prepared for the utmost.

"Prince, the Baron di Grestal has undoubtedly informed you of the demonstration which took place in Piazza di Fiera this evening after vespers. The people are at this moment gathered in the Cathedral square and seem disinclined to violence. We have been chosen to bring to your ears the voice of the discontented people."

The Count's companions bowed slightly.

"Gentleman, listen to me. I cannot receive

in my palace the ambassadors of a people who are stirring up sedition in the streets, instead of petitioning for what they desire by legal means and with Christian humility."

Having spoken these words the Cardinal made as though to arise, and indicated with a gesture that the audience was over.

But the Count remained motionless.

"Your reply, O Prince, saddens me. In these critical circumstances it may be the oil which transforms the smouldering flame into a conflagration. Reflect, O Prince! You are the father of this people which has not lost affection for you. Grant the demands of this people, and the unhappy hour which passes over our city will leave no residue of discord or sorrow."

The Cardinal cut the speech short with a gesture of impatience.

"But exactly what do the people want?"

This question followed by a long pause. Ludovico Particella arose, stood by the window and gazed on the three knights who formed a sort of triumvirate of the revolt.

"The people," declared the Count in a firm voice, "demand the release of Don Benizio."

Ludovico betrayed a gesture of surprise. Then he crossed his arms and resumed the manner of an impassive observer of men and events. The Cardinal, on the contrary, after an excess of noisy laughter, which greatly surprised the three envoys, replied:

"The people is ever a child which demands

the impossible. The release of Don Benizio is a silly, infantile demand. It was not without grave cause that I decided to cast my private secretary into a subterranean cell. He profaned a tomb. And when I demanded an explanation of his nefarious act, he replied with an arrogant brutality unworthy of a subject and of a Christian. You perhaps are aware of Don Benizio's enterprise."

The Count of Castelnuovo turned pale. But in that moment he had the courage or the cowardice to lie.

"No, Prince. Vague rumours, however, have reached my ears."

"Nevertheless a knight's sword was found in the Church of the Holy Trinity."

"Certainly not mine."

"On another occasion we shall come to the bottom of the matter. It is probable that Don Benizio himself will end by revealing the name of the companion who assisted him in an act of banditry. Or else I shall learn of it from other lips."

The heart of the Count di Castelnuovo beat madly. The memory of Filiberta, the words of the Cardinal set fire to his blood. The idea of assassination tempted him. To kill a tyrant and present himself to the people! Vindicator of the people's liberty! To repeat the epic gesture of Brutus! It was an insane moment.

The Cardinal demanded:

"Do my people desire anything else?"

Antonio Count Di Castelnuovo caught hold of himself and replied with an almost brutal frankness:

"The people demand the dismissal of Ludovico Particella, the exile of Claudia, and the retrocession of the Palace in Campo di Fiera to the public domain."

The councillor interrupted in a sarcastic tone:

"The people's demands are really too modest. I am old and wish to go. But I do not see just why my daughter must be obliged to leave Trent."

The Cardinal broke in with violence:

"These demands are not modest, but insane, my dear Ludovico. They cannot even be discussed. Before the rebels obtain your dismissal and the exile of Claudia they will have to pass over the dead body of Emanuel Madruzzo. So you may go, you envoys, and tell the trouble-makers that their grotesque demands caused amusement to the Cardinal, the Prince of Trent. Baron di Grestal will break the bones of the rebels. The instigators of the revolt will not escape me. I supposed that the people desired a material diminution of taxes, a free distribution of food. Instead they demand the diminution of the authority of the prince through an act of sacrilegious revolt. No. No. Go and tell them that Emanuel Madruzzo does not obey the orders of the mob."

"Prince, this reply may occasion bloodshed."

"It is they who desire it."

"Cardinal, do not forget that the Church of Christ commands that princes be not tyrants, but fathers of their peoples."

"Of peoples who obey, not of those who revolt."

"Grant something at least, and the passions of the people will be calmed."

"Any concession under these circumstances would be an abdication."

"Prince, for the last time, reflect. You will succeed in subduing the rebels, but you will have sown the seed of hate in thousands of hearts. Make the gesture of forgiveness."

The knight made an eloquent peroration in support of his cause. The Cardinal seemed moved. He showed a moment's hesitation. In reality he was of gentle nature, disinclined to bloodshed.

"Then withdraw for a few moments. I will take counsel and make known to you my decisions."

The three withdrew.

The conference of the Cardinal and Ludovico Particella was not brief. The Cardinal was disposed to concede the release of Don Benizio. Particella insisted on the rejection of all the demands. At the end the Cardinal imposed his will and the councillor bowed. At the given signal the three envoys returned.

"I accept but one of the demands which you have made. To-morrow I shall propose to the Aulic Council the release of Don Benizio and I shall endeavour to obtain it. I cannot do more."

"I shall inform the waiting populace." With these words the three knights, after a profound bow, took their leave.

The crowd was waiting impatiently, for the Ave Maria had already sounded. When the Count di Castelnuovo communicated the decision of the

prince, a medley of discordant voices rent the air. But at a sign from the Captain of the City, the suzzi hurled themselves anew upon the multitude. The knights resisted. The conflict assumed the character of an insurrection. But the defenceless people fled madly through the alleys towards their homes, and even the knights at last dispersed.

Night fell upon the city. All the doors were shut. No light burned in the windows. Through the deserted streets echoed the rhythmic march of the suzzi and the halberdiers.

Baron di Grestal betook himself to the Palace of the Albere to make his detailed report on the events of the day. He found the Cardinal in conference with Ludovico Particella. Prince and councillor thanked the baron and dismissed him. During the same night the Count di Castelnuovo, fearing arrest for his participation in the revolt and still more for the affair of the Convent of the Trinity, departed for Italy.

The next day the Cardinal presided at the session of the Aulic Council, which met to discuss the events of Sunday. It was decided to release Don Benizio, but to exile him for a year from the Principate.

The same evening Don Benizio, accompanied by two officials of the suzzi, departed for a convent in the neighbourhood of Bressanone. Ludovico Particella continued to perform the offices of councillor and Claudia those of distant mistress.

Little by little the excitement was calmed. September passed without events worthy of men-

tion. Meanwhile the Cardinal was growing old waiting for the papal dispensation which would permit his marriage with Claudia, still a recluse in Castel Toblino.

CHAPTER IX

The first days of October came and no good news had yet arrived from Rome. The intercession of the Queen of Spain and the King of Hungary, the attestations of Brother Macario da Venezia of the Minor Observers, and of Vittorio Barbacovi of the Cathedral of Trent, confessors of the cardinal, had not succeeded in hastening the decision of Alexander VII. Emanuel Madruzzo had spent in embassies and gifts fully a hundred thousand florins. He had his "bridal equipment" ready. Yet the papal decision did not come.

This delay made him uneasy, but it did not deprive him of hope for a favourable reply. Meanwhile, he did not concern himself with the affairs of the Principate. He lived from day to day, entertaining himself by reading his favourite classic authors in the wardrobe, a beautiful chamber in the highest part of the castle, containing splendid vestments, silverware, jewels, medals, antiquities, glass vases, a display of splendid plate and a collection of all the marbles which had been dug up in the domains of the Bishopric, not to mention "an antique breviary containing the life of San Vigilio, Advocate of Trent."

One morning towards the end of summer while the Cardinal, just returned from a walk in the

deer-park, was going to his private study, he was approached by a courtier in his service who announced the presence in the castle of Sister Bernardina of the Cross of Rovereto. The Cardinal was not greatly surprised. He commanded that she be ushered into his presence, and prepared to receive her.

The chronicles of the period relate that "Della Croce Giovanna Maria or Sister Bernardina" was born at Rovereto in 1603, the daughter of Joseph Floriana, a man who drank freely of the wine of Isera. The daughter, Bernardina grew to womanhood fair and buxom. Gracious and charming, with blonde and lustrous hair, with white and delicately coloured flesh, flashing eyes, and grave and frowning aspect, she seemed to despise the base necessities of life. While yet a girl she showed herself inclined to works of piety and devotional exercises.

At that period there was in Rovereto a certain Brother Thomas of Rovereto, who seeing the sanctity of behaviour that distinguished this fresh flower of loveliness, urged her to abandon the world and shut herself up in a convent. There was, however, an obstacle in the mother, who had other plans for her daughter.

Yet the fame of this excellent and devout creature spread rapidly through Rovereto. Bernardina went to Trent with the intention of establishing a convent. But at the court of the Madruzzo the plebeian girl reformer did not succeed in gaining audience. This disdainful creature strongly resented

the rebuff and fell sick. Then Affra, a devout Sister of the third order of Saint Francis, came to visit her and became a devoted friend. Through her Bernardina found access to the devout matrons of the Trentino, and they became so active on her behalf that she was granted permission to found a convent at Rovereto in conjunction with the church of San Carlo, and under the rule of Saint Clara.

Here she took the name of Sister Maria Giovanna of the Cross. Her sermons, full of inspiration and enthusiasm, gained her much fame, and she came to be regarded as one endowed with the gift of prophecy. The poor came to seek her counsel in the miseries of life, and princes sought her advice in the vicissitudes of war. Illustrious personages passing through Rovereto visited this exemplary woman. The Emperor Leopold corresponded with her, and gave her six thousand florins for the erection of a Convent of Saint Anna at Borgo in Valsugana.

Sister Bernardina of the Cross entered, saluting the Cardinal with a profound bow. That confused and timorous hesitation, which paralyses the tongues of persons meeting for the first time, vanished. The Sister of Rovereto had no fear of being sent away by the last Madruzzo, whose innate generosity she knew and whose errors she was willing to overlook.

She had a mission to fulfil, and it had been confided to her by the supreme authority of the Church, the Pope.

Sister Bernardina had lost the graciousness of

her youth. The veil conferred a cadaverous pallor on her formerly clear, but now dried and wrinkled face. Her eyes shone with a mystic fire which revealed a spirit animated by a divine love. The shape of her body was not visible beneath her robe; only her long and subtle fingers protruded from the ample sleeves. Her voice had all the inflections of an inspired woman. At times it was the warm and musical voice of the sorrowing Magdalene at the feet of Jesus; again it had the dull accent of the nun who prays in the solitude of her cell. At other times it had the sharp hissing of a woman who forces the chords of her voice to reach distant unearthly ears.

Emanuel Madruzzo had never seen Sister Bernardina. He knew her by reputation and had never disturbed her in her religious activities. He knew that popes, kings and princes held her in highest esteem, even to the extent of appealing to her in their most serious difficulties. After that first attempt to gain access to the court of the Madruzzo, Sister Bernardina had vowed never again to cross the threshold of the castle of Trent. She regarded the family of the Madruzzo as lost to divine grace. And she would not have broken her vow had not the Pope himself deigned to choose her to fulfil this most difficult and delicate mission.

The Sister raised her scintillating eyes to the Cardinal and began:

"Three evenings ago two Franciscans presented themselves at the Convent of Borgo in Valsugana where I was in retreat, and asked to speak with

me. They were messengers from the Pope who had commissioned me, through them, to come to Trent to place in your hands his holy decision written with his own hand addressed to you, Prince and Pastor. This is the purpose of my unexpected visit, and here is the papal letter."

So saying, Bernardina drew from a purse of black velvet which hung from her girdle a paper which bore the seal of the sacred palaces, and handed it to the Cardinal. He, on receiving it, made a great effort to contain his emotion. From the first words of the nun he had divined the purpose of her visit.

The scrap of paper released him from his exasperating expectancy. Whether affirmative or negative, the papal decision had finally arrived. The Cardinal said:

"Permit me, Sister, to read it immediately."

The Sister bowed.

The Cardinal began to read the document. His eyes coursed rapidly over the written lines, like those of a man condemned to death, reading the response to a request for clemency. In a brief preamble the Pope related the intervention of the Queen of Spain and of the King of Hungary, and made mention also of the request which bore the attestations of the confessors of Emanuel Madruzzo.

Thereafter he made known that, having put the question to the Supreme Council of the Church, all the Cardinals had placed themselves on record as opposed to the granting of the desired dispensation. The letter ended by exhorting the Cardinal

not to insist further in a scandalous request, on pain of ecclesiastical severity and papal anathema.

When he had finished reading, Emanuel Madruzzo bowed his head as though to collect his thoughts. Then, without saying a word, he tore the letter again and again into the smallest possible bits.

At the sight of this sacrilege, Sister Bernardina rose to her feet and with trembling voice said:

"My Prince and Pastor, hearken unto me, as other lords have hearkened unto me. The thing which you have just now done with such cool deliberation has revealed to me that your soul is on the way to perdition. I hope, for the sake of your eternal salvation, that you will not choose the path that leads to the final precipice. Mortify your flesh. Control your passions. Put away the flatteries that tempt you. Enclose your life in the grace of God. Give an example of virtue and you will be imitated and pitied. My words are the words of a poor nun. I know it. But I also know that I am expressing an immortal truth. The princes of the Church must be a beacon of light to their subjects, to the humble and the heavy laden. Only thus does one become worthy to guide the destinies of peoples."

Emanuel, lost in his own meditations, listened to these words which beat, rebounded and clashed in his brain, without producing any clear images. And the Sister began again to speak in an ever more inspired voice, which finally fascinated and subdued Emanuel.

"Prince, reflect. What is your life? A shadow, a dream, an illusion. What are the material pleasures which enslave us? Who wins eternal bliss? Surely not he who gives free rein to his carnal appetites, but he who knows how to control himself by prayer and mortify by force his rebel senses. He who is willing to separate himself from the world the better to understand and pardon it. He who in solitude renounces ease, and through silence, meditation and prayer cultivates the incorruptible and eternal riches of the spirit.

"Dig a deep chasm, my lord, between your past and your future. Forget, oblige yourself to forget and your suffering will be your purification. No one shall know from my lips that you, like a heretic worthy of the stake, tore into bits a paper upon which our Supreme Shepherd had placed his hand. Only accept with Christian obedience the decision of the Pontiff, and you will effect your own pardon."

Emanuel began to feel the fascination of the nun. The idea of renouncing his dream and closing the drama of his life crossed his brain. But the image of Claudia returned to perturb it. She possessed him, even unto death.

Sister Bernardina gazed fixedly at the Cardinal. Emanuel gazed at her with a look of infinite sadness.

"Sister," he said, "your words move me. I would gladly follow your counsel, but I have not the power. I have begged the Pope to grant me a dispensation which would rescue me from the

double life which I have been leading for twenty years. My past is known and it cannot be cancelled. It is strange. I am not permitted to adopt the honest solution of matrimony. And yet concubinage is tolerated."

"Neither the one nor the other," replied the nun vigorously. "But of two evils choose the lesser. However, I do not wish to burden my conscience with the sin of discussing the decisions of our infallible Pontiff. I repeat that, after twenty years, it is time to return to an upright life."

"Will marriage prevent me from doing my duty as a good Christian?"

"But it is this hypocritical union which must cease. Nor must the thing which you call legal union come to pass. Put an end to this guilty relation to redeem your past and set an example of prudence."

"I feel—it is impossible."

"Are you so weak, my lord?"

"The flesh is ever weak. There are chains which no human power can break. God is too compassionate to refuse me His pardon. Much will be forgiven to one who loves much."

"In the spirit, not in the senses."

"Christ did not say so." The Cardinal pronounced these last words gravely, then as though talking to himself, added:

"See, Sister, my life has been a subtle martyrdom. I have not in me the stuff to be a prince and pastor of the Church. I was forced to it. Others imposed their will upon me. For twenty years a

terrible battle has been raging in my soul, the tendencies which impel me towards a free life struggling with my duties as prince and cardinal. Quarrels, discords, conspiracies and scarcely veiled hatreds have embittered me. I felt the emptiness about me, that emptiness which isolates the powerful of the earth and makes them strangers among their own kind. I had need of help, of a human hand stretched out to me in a gesture of friendliness. I needed to be loved! A woman appeared to me—

"Do not interrupt me, Sister. I know I should have asked aid of God, consoled myself in adoration of Him, drowned my sorrow in religious observances. But I should have been obliged to become a recluse, and this thought crushed me.

"The woman who has loved me and who is now awaiting me, is not the one pictured by the people. Claudia Particella has brought light into darkness of my existence, has anointed my wounds with balsam. For her sake I have endured the hatred of the ecclesiastics and have resisted the rebellion of the people. We have lived and suffered together. Death will find us united. Sister, pity me, but do not despise me."

Emanuel was silent. His commotion had held him prisoner, and tears filled his eyes. Sister Bernardina did not wish to insist with vain words. The Cardinal rose and kissed her hand. The nun said:

"I shall remember you in my prayers."

And with noiseless step she departed.

Emanuel threw himself into the chair, over-

come. The valets who heard his sobbing came to ask if he felt ill. He dismissed them, and after giving free vent to his sorrow sought to put his ideas in order for the examination of the situation. A complex, difficult, dangerous situation!

The possible solutions of the problem were various, but none of them easy. To rebel against the Pope? To throw the cardinal's purple into the rubbish heap and marry Claudia?

This solution was the first to present itself to Emanuel's mind, but after some reflection he found himself obliged to reject it. Rebellion against the Pope, even if it did not cost him his life or grave personal injury, would cast him alone upon the highways of the world, abandoned and despised. No court on earth would grant hospitality to one who had rebelled against the Pope and instigated rebellion. No one would have a spark of sympathy for this man, approaching old age, with a soul tortured by amorous passion.

How could he live? He would be obliged to roam from land to land, from nation to nation, in continuous fear of being struck down by the vengeance of the Vatican, which never pardons. He would know, in the poet's words, "how bitter it is to eat the bread of another in another's house."

And Claudia? Would she sustain with unconquered soul the material and moral discomforts of an existence without certainty of the morrow? And if Claudia should abandon him? Emanuel did not even dare to think of this possibility. He had loved Claudia madly and believed himself madly

loved by Claudia in return.

No; it was certainly not political ambition or fear of popular scandal which restrained him from taking to flight. It was the material insecurity of the future, since his property would be confiscated by the Pope or by the emissaries of the Emperor. Yet he dreamed of ending his life tranquilly, free from the worries of government and the hypocrisies of the church, unplagued by malicious tongues, far from Trent, perhaps even on a tiny island in the midst of the sea, and there forget the adversities of his virile youth in the perpetual love of Claudia.

Supreme illusion!—What then? Continue in the equivocal situation? But this solution, too, presented insurmountable difficulties. The recent revolt had warned the cardinal with a clearness not easily forgotten. The people of Trent hated Claudia because they regarded her as the chief artisan of the economic ruin of the city. The people of Trent endured unwillingly the tyrannical dominion of the house of Particella, and the hardly repressed passions, the long-cherished hatreds and the unassuaged misery were but awaiting another opportunity to burst forth. The people of Trent, by the assault on and attempted destruction of the palace in Campo di Fiera had clearly demonstrated that it was unwilling longer to tolerate the dissipation of the public wealth to satisfy the caprices of a courtesan.

And would Claudia herself consent to remain perpetually a recluse at Castel Toblino, in the position of an affianced bride kept ever waiting?

No. Claudia was longing to return to Trent. Her exile, however voluntary and pleasant, had at last begun to weary her. She had fully decided to end the equivocal situation even through flight.

A third solution presented itself to the Cardinal. Abandon Claudia, shut her up in a convent, as though to lose all track of her, and when the popular passions had cooled, quietly resume their life together. Emanuel could not resign himself to this solution. He had suffered too much from Claudia's absence, and the thought of passing his old age in solitude terrified him.

Bizarre ideas, fantastic projects, paradoxical plans whirled through his brain. He could not decide. He lacked the thread of Arianne which could extricate him from the labyrinth of his life. The voice within his heart said: "An end to hesitation! Break the bonds! Enough of vain uncertainties and useless meditations! The moment has come to act! Let the die be cast! Alea Jacta Est. Better a wandering, uncertain, tormented life than a life of hypocrisy, of baseness, of slavery. What restrains you? The duties of the Principate? The people is always a beast and will not fail to bow to another master.

"The dignity of the purple? You have already sullied it. The scandal of your love affairs are part of history in the memories of all. Disobedience to the Pope? The Pope has provoked it, since you first humbly begged a dispensation. And if you are committing a sin by permitting your passion to master you, the sin will be pardoned, for

to him who loves much, much will be forgiven. Decide then! If the sunrise and noontide of your life were sad, let the sunset be serene and glorious and purifying."

But to the invitations of this voice cold reason opposed itself, marshalling the difficulties, the perils, the snares. In this succession of blue sky and clouds, of day and night, the Cardinal's soul struggled. At one point the thought of suicide shot through his brain.

A sense of general weariness came over him. Through the window came the rays of the October sun. From the trees in the deer-park the yellow leaves were falling and he could hear the calls of the late swallows. Nature communicated its sadness to men. And the idea of eternal repose came to Emanuel.

To sleep for ever! In the eternal silence and the eternal mystery! To sleep oblivious of what has been and what is to be! To abandon the world without rancour, without fear and without regret, like a debtor paying his debt to mother nature!

For an instant Emanuel smiled at his mad idea. He would gladly have gone through the inferno if Claudia were at his side. With her he could endure the torment of "the infernal whirlwind which never ceases."

"Claudia!" cried the Cardinal in a loud voice. "Claudia, forgive me for not being able to clear a definite road out of this morass. Love makes me hesitate like a schoolboy. Ah, love, light snatched from the heavens, from the rebel angels and given

to men when they lost paradise!

"Jesus, if it be true that Thou wert born of an earthly mother; if it be true that Thou hast drunk at the fountains of ancient wisdom opened to Thee by thy teachers in the desert; if it be true that Thou hast loved the poor and the suffering, the sick, the despised, the slaves, the Samaritans, and those living far from Thy Galilee; if it be true that Thou hast raised up and protected the sinner Mary of Magadala, that she anointed Thee with odorous unguents and dried Thy feet with her long, soft black tresses; if it be true that Thou hast walked with her among the fields toward the cedar-bowered hills while from the heavens, O Son of God, the stars smiled upon Thy earthly loves; if it be true that once at the feast of Purim Thou didst defend the adulteress and didst rescue her whom the ancient law of the Hebrew people deemed worthy of being stoned; if it be true that along the road to Calvary Thou didst console the weeping women who were anguished at the sight of Thy martyrdom, and even upon the cross, after the invocation to the Father, a word of love flowered upon Thy lips; if it be true, O Jesus, that Thou didst pass through life as one athirst for human love; then it will be permitted to me also, the last of Thy followers, to love, as one loves but once to the grave and beyond."

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CHAPTER X

The battle in the Cardinal's soul lasted several days. To benumb himself and forget, he began again to lead a life of ostentation and dissipation. The hands of the majordomo were plunged deep into the coffers of the Principate. Great was the misery in all the Trentino because of the heavy export taxes which limited the export of wine to the north—for the wine trade, then as now, was the major source of public revenue. A winter full of suffering threatened the miserable exiles of the further bank of the Adige, at Pie di Castello. But Emanuel seemed to have adopted as his the phrase of the Roi Soleil, "After me the deluge!"

Ludovico Particella directed the politics of the Principate and held the Cathedral Chapter in check. An experienced, expert, subtle man, endowed with a kind of superficial scepticism which frequently hides a character of steel, Ludovico, while not dissimulating the gravity of the situation, felt that the catastrophe was very distant if not impossible. The festive days commenced. Emanuel had not yet informed Claudia of the Pope's decision. And Claudia awaited in melancholy mood some indication of the turn of events. Finally, weary of vain waiting, she unexpectedly appeared one evening at the castle.

That evening the Cardinal had invited all the notabilities of the city to a grand banquet, several persons who were influential in the German colony, the leading prelates of the clergy, many officials and some academicians, survivors of the "Accademia Trentina degli Accesi," founded in January, 1628, with the motto: "Motu vivificat."

The surviving academicians who participated at the Cardinal's banquet were the censor, Bernardino Bonporto, called "L'Aggirato," Giovanni Sapi, called "L'Aspirante," and the treasurer, Simone Girardi di Pietrapiana, called by his fellows "il Raccolto." Some thirty persons were seated at the horse-shoe board in a grand salon adorned with frescoes by Romanino, Guilio Romano and Brusasorci. On the table great bunches of flowers gave forth their odour, and plants and flowers were heaped in the corners of the room. The air had that enervating closeness of closed rooms in which persons are gathered for a succulent meal.

At the head of the table sat the Cardinal. He was making an effort to appear gay, and drank much despite his usual moderation. Perhaps he was seeking in intoxication release from the painful secret which was gnawing his heart.

The guests were eating lustily. Amid the coarse conversation, sometimes underlined by a particularly noisy outburst of laughter and jokes at the expense of the clergy, could be heard the dull crunching of jaws sunk deep into the cunningly spiced meat, delightful to those wolves' stomachs. The jars of Isera wine passed among the guests,

who rapidly found themselves in the eddies of intoxication.

The supper had already lasted two hours. The torpor of digestion, the delicious weariness which follows copious meals, held the banqueters fixed to their chairs. Their eyes gleamed, their faces were ruddy, their tongues were thick, their brains were immersed in alcoholic fumes. Primitive animalism, unconscious and foolish, resumed dominion over them.

In the conversations obscene words mingled with rhetorical speeches. The more loquacious turned to Boccaccio, but to a Boccaccio become trivialized and sacrilegious. There were stories of penitents at the confessional, of heirs gathered around the death bed, of virgins initiated into the divine mysteries of Cupid in the discreet shadow of a sacristy, of sorrowing widows quickly consoled in the name of the biblical motto: "Increase and multiply." Around the priests recounting their own experiences were bent the heads of other guests, perturbed by the erotic instinct whipped up by abundant libations.

The officers alternated stories of the conquests of war with those of conquests of women. The Germans methodically devoured each dish.

At the end of the table a group of Academicians were discussing Aretino. Giovanni Sapi recalled that "Cristoforo Madruzzo in 1548 sent to Aretino at his splendid house in Venice a gift consisting of two silver goblets with gold inlaid so fairly within and without, and with such lovely and subtle work

adorned, that aught more fair or precious or better or richer could not be fashioned by human hand in honour of the intellect and of art."

"And what does this prove?" asked the Cardinal, whose attention had been attracted as soon as he heard the name of his ancestor.

"It proves that Aretino was well known and highly esteemed in this court."

"He deserved it," affirmed a priest whose hair stood erect like the quills upon the fretful porcupine. His ears stood out in fan shape like those of a bat, and he had the gross sensual lips of a faun.

But this affirmation pained the only guest who was not drunk, Simone Girardi. His weak constitution did not permit him to emulate his colleagues in the pleasures of the table. He took his revenge by satirizing them. To him were attributed the "pasquinate" of Trent, brief poems, sometimes in dog Latin, ridiculing the chief personalities of the city.

"Aretino," was Girardi's verdict, "wrote to flatter vice, not to castigate it."

"And Cardinal Bibbiena?" asked the priest who had spoken first. "And Macchiavelli? And Lorenzo d'Medici? And Cavaliere Marino?"

All these questions came from a group of priests who felt the need of defending, by some device or other, the immoral, obscene, corrupting literature of the time, because they knew that in large part it was written by the clergy.

"Castigat ridendo mores—chastise the manners of the time by ridicule" was the comment of an

old but by no means impotent pettifogging lawyer-priest. As to his mores, rumours of a serious character were in circulation. It appeared that he was dedicated to Greek love, a thing not infrequent among the humanists and, in particular, among the ecclesiastics of the upper, middle and lower strata. In that period the love of men was not forbidden by the penal code.

"Literature is a mirror of manners," added a doctor in theology. "It is evident. When war is the life of the people, their poetical expression gives us a heroic poem. When religious faith is widespread, tenacious and profound, Christian poetry flourishes. When the age is vain, superficial and enslaved, art loses all content, the Muses descend into the mire, inspiration is poor and weary. Poetry dies, and the reign of phrases commences. Verba, voces pratereaque nibil. Words and sounds and naught else."

"Well said," cried the academicians with one voice.

"Love," continued the theologian, "becomes the humiliation of the spirit and the apotheosis of the flesh. The soul yields place to the senses. There are earthly loves which have in them a quality of divinity, like that of Dante for Beatrice. There are other loves, by far the greater in number, whereby the Venus of sensualism makes man one with the brutes. Woman then becomes but a mere instrument of masculine pleasure. These women have ever had a pernicious influence on the souls of the rulers of the people. Recall Cleopatra,

Messalina, Imperia, Claudia Particella."

This last name had scarcely escaped the lips of the imprudent theologian when a cry of astonished indignation arose from the company and all eyes were centred on the Cardinal. Although pallid, he remained motionless, his hands outstretched upon the table.

But Ludovico Particella arose brusquely. He strode to the theologian and slapped him. The theologian dared not return the blow. Wine had betrayed him, and "in vino veritas."

What he had said was in the minds of all the banqueters, of all citizens of Trent and of all who were familiar with the condition of the Principate. But this particular moment was not the one best suited for saying it aloud. The guests waited the outburst of a tempest and continued to fix their gaze upon the Cardinal. There was a moment of silence. Then tongues were unbound. With one voice they craved forgiveness. The theologian, his cheeks red from shame and from the slap, was preparing to leave the hall when the Cardinal made sign to him to remain.

"No—take your place again—do not fear."

The other obeyed. There followed a few of those fearfully stupid moments of expectation which paralyse the brain and muscles of the devotees of Bacchus.

The Cardinal filled his glass to the brim with Isra wine, drank it down at one draught, and with a gesture indicated that he was about to speak.

"Do not fear, my theological friend who,

whether intentionally or not, has opened a wound that is only yet healed. Do not fear, O you my esteemed friends. Let those of you who deem me capable of vengeance leave my presence. This is not the table of the Borgias. It is not in wine but in the heart that poison lies concealed.

"Hear me. I wish to cry aloud a thing which is a mystery to no one. I wish to defend that which has been adjudged a crime, but which for me is beautiful and glorious. Listen then to me, O prelates of the Cathedral, and you the officers of my domain, and you lawyers, and you friends of my youth, and you academicians and thou, the father of Claudia. Hear me all. What I am about to tell you may be sinful, unworthy of my name and my office. No matter. If ever I wore a mask, that mask falls to-night, and falls in the presence of you who represent the flower of the population which obeys me.

"I love Claudia. I have loved her for twenty years. Do not blush. Do not hypocritically bow your heads. I should then be obliged to call you whited sepulchres.

"Each of us, O shepherds of souls, has sinned. Do not deny it. You are corrupt. This supper has been indeed different from that Last Supper which Jesus took with His Disciples before the Master approached the Supreme Sacrifice. We, all of us, have drunk of the cup of profane love. I, too, have done so, but purely as few others have.

"I have, as you know, begged a dispensation of the Pope. He has refused it. He wishes a

scandal, and a scandal he shall have. I solemnly proclaim my right to earthly love. Claudia shall be mine for ever, whether the Pontiff wishes it or not, whether or not you desire it—you who have placed Claudia among the courtesans who dragged princes and peoples to ruin.

"Do you understand me, O theologian? What is going on in the minds of my enemies does not interest me. But why then this confession? Were you worthy to receive it? I say to you with Horace, carpe diem.

"A lute! A lute! Bring a lute and let one of you pluck from its strings a hymn!"

The Cardinal's words had stunned all present. Was he also drunk? Perhaps among the ecclesiastic it was no unusual occurrence.

The lute was brought and one of the many pages in the Cardinal's suite commenced to pluck the strings. Then he sang. His delicate, subtle voice calmed the general excitement. The monotonous music disposed men to slumber.

The banquet was about to end when a valet announced Claudia. The Cardinal leapt from his chair. The other guests stared with eyes opened wide in wonder. Terror seized them once more, for they feared the evil woman.

Claudia entered, clad in black. She embraced her father, who had gone to meet her in the corridor. On entering the hall she immediately walked up to Emanuel. The men glanced at one another. The officers bowed slightly at Claudia's salute, as did also the academicians. Only the priests pre-

served their statuesque immobility and their hostile demeanour. Claudia cast her wide black mantle in a corner of the room. Then she removed the veil from her head, permitting the unbound hair to flow freely over her shoulders.

Her face showed signs of suffering, but her eyes retained all their effulgence. None of the guests spoke. The unexpected apparition had struck them dumb.

Claudia seated herself at the Cardinal's side. She understood, from his scarcely concealed perturbation, that a serious incident must have occurred just before her arrival. She regretted not having come sooner. She smiled that smile which Don Benizio called divine, and which the people called diabolical. Then rising, and modulating her voice to those tones which penetrate men's hearts she said:

"It appears that I have come to a funeral feast. Why does no one speak? Because my coming has chilled the gaiety of the guests?"

Then turning to the page:

"Why do you not play?"

The page placed his fingers on the lute and struck a few chords.

"And you, my Prince, why are you silent? My unexpected visit disturbs you, it would seem. Yet there is nothing extraordinary in it. The autumn past, I felt weary of sojourning in Castel Toblino. I have come alone—so. Perhaps I should have given warning. But I did not expect to arrive just at the moment when my coming would

poison the convivial joy of these gentlemen. I shall leave."……And she made as though to go to the door.

But the Cardinal, grasping her ample sleeve, detained her, and begged:

"Remain, Claudia. You are in your own house." The smile returned to the lips of the imperious lady. She cast a defiant glance at the prelates who were eyeing her with hostile snouts, and then, resuming her habitual mien of statuesque dignity, announced:

"If I am truly in my own house, then I find the guests who linger about your table, my lord, at this moment unseasonable. Deign to dismiss them."

The banqueters did not await the order of the Cardinal. They fled. Only a few saluted Emanuel.

Despite the fumes of the wine they revealed their indignation at the unheard-of scandal. It passed all human bounds. The Germans alone refrained from participating in the general reprobation. But the priests were furious. The unexpected return of Claudia disconcerted them. They feared new plots, new revolts, new disasters, and ever and always scandals.

The bewildered theologian, descending toward the Borgo Nuovo quarter, resumed little by little his normal state. He foresaw imminent calamities.

"Here," he said, "is one more proof of what I said during the banquet. The women who are destined to afflict princes and peoples, are capricious, violent, impenetrable. Which of us imagined the return of Claudia? She arrived like a bird of

evil omen. Our end is near."

And the prelates agreed, hacking the midnight air with the weary gestures of men who are satiated with food and drink.

Meanwhile there remained in the banquet hall only the Cardinal and Claudia. The flowers drooped on the table. The plants in the corners ot the room had folded their leaves against the close odours of many foods. The abandoned lute augmented the melancholy of the time and place.

The silence was solemn. From time to time one could hear the rhythmical steps of the guards at the gate and the cry of the sentinel. Emanuel had bent his head under the weight of a torturing meditation. Claudia gazed at him without speaking. How often had their souls enjoyed these sweet and guilty intimacies! Their recollections of them made the past live again.

But Emanuel was weary, exhausted. Perhaps he had drunk too much. An acute, ineffable, diffused pain prostrated him. He needed comfort. And Claudia gently embraced him. Her delicate hand passed lightly over the hot forehead on which his years, his struggles and the cares of office had traced the wrinkles of old age. She covered the eyes veiled in melancholy and caressed the dried cheeks.

Then the words of passion found their way to Claudia's lips:

"You were not expecting me, I know. But I came, because exile was choking me. Tell me some news—from Rome."

Emanuel raised his head, took Claudia's hand and lifted it to his lips:

"Bad news has come. The Pope refuses me a dispensation. Sister Bernardina of Rovereto came to announce the papal decision to me. She handed me the supreme sentence, written by the Pope's own hand.....I tore it up."

This act of revolt did not surprise Claudia. "Then have you still any hope? What have you decided? Why did you not inform me of what was happening? Do you remember our old promises? Shall we flee?"

These questions flew to the lips of the beautiful courtesan. Emanuel was silent for a while, as though he had need of rearranging his train of thought. Then he spoke:

"I no longer have any hope. The Pope is immovable. The attestations of my confessors availed nothing. The Vatican wishes at all costs to avoid public scandal—as though the people did not already know our story.

"But to-night I threw down the mask. To-night I proclaimed with all my force, with all my passion, that I loved you."

"Now I understand the cause of your agitation."

"Yes," added Emanuel. "My confession astonished my guests, the priests in particular.....I rid myself of a heavy burden. Now I feel better. I have dared, Claudia mine. At last I have dared. To-morrow the whole city will know what happened to-night. No matter, the die is now cast.

If my declaration is interpreted as the prelude to my rebellion against the Pope, so much the better."

Emanuel found again the proud determination of a virility which will not renounce life and love. But Claudia remained perplexed. The future appeared to her eyes as an enormous interrogation point. She rose from the window seat. The night air calmed her excitement a little. Then she suddenly turned and demanded:

"Why do we not flee?"

"Flee? Where?"

"Do you recall our talk at Castel Toblino? You promised me to renounce everything and live with me far from Trent, among unknown people. And now....."

"I should like to flee." The confession burned him. A man never willingly confesses his impotence.

"I cannot. The Church of Rome would pursue us every day of our lives, poisoning our ears with fear and suspicion. You know that the Church of Rome has never pardoned those who deserted her bosom to obey earthly passions. We should be pursued from land to land, leading a miserable and tormented existence. It is better to remain here and defy the Pope's anger, the ecclesiastics' conspiracies, and the popular revolts."

"And I too shall remain here?" Claudia asked.

"Do not doubt it. I have declared it in the presence of my guests, and I shall declare it again whenever I wish. This house is yours. You are

the mistress of this castle, and if you wished to destroy or burn it, I should bow to your desire, I should not oppose your caprice."

The man's total surrender flattered the primordial childish vanity which is woman's, and Claudia received Emanuel's final words with a tremor of pride which shot through her blood. She was secure, then. She could dare.

"Listen to me, Emanuel. I do not ask, I shall never ask of you, freedom to demolish or burn this princely house, in which everything is familiar to us and tells us the sweet story of our love. But there are hateful men whom I wish to send away, men whose overbearing glance I never wish to meet again. And I ask you....."

Before terminating the sentence, Claudia bent over Emanuel.

"I ask of you the liberty to proscribe all your enemies and mine, all those who have plotted against us.....Oh, I ask of you nothing impossible or absurd."

"But," objected Emanuel, "these persecutions will multiply our enemies."

"No matter," declared Claudia. Let us free ourselves from the most annoying of them without worrying about those who will come, if and when they do come. The precious hour of vengeance has arrived. Perhaps we shall not be obliged to flee if we set to work audaciously."

Emanuel bowed his head. The conqueror was triumphing once again.

CHAPTER XI

On the morrow the news of Claudia's return spread throughout the city and made a profound impression. Some of the knights who were friends of Count Antonio di Castelnuovo informed him immediately. The prelates of the Cathedral Chapter held a secret meeting at which they decided to renew their requests to the Pope and the Emperor for their immediate intervention in the affairs of the Principate.

The merchants, the shopkeepers and the artisans feared that with Claudia's return the taxes would be increased. And last of all, the poorer classes manifested in their wine-room conversations the disposition to revolt. Even the courtiers and intimates of the castle and the functionaries of the Principate smelled the odour of corpses, and with the ingratitudes customary in servants prepared to change masters. Absurd rumours, low calumnies, fantastic stories circulated in the city and became the theme of all discourses. The citizens argued about the future with the preoccupation of those who see no road ahead save that which leads to ruin. The secular domination of the Madruzzo was closing ingloriously in the scandalous chronicle of a senile love affair.

The Cardinal no longer had defenders. From

all sides, from great and humble, rich and poor, the stones of resentment and condemnation were cast at him. At one time his Christian piety had gained for him much sympathy. It was said that he fasted three days a week in addition to the regular days of fast. He was also known for his devotion on behalf of the souls in purgatory, for whom he had celebrated thousands and thousands of masses. Now all this was considered hypocrisy, duplicity, falseness, diabolical art. How the Cardinal's enemies asked themselves, could faith and sin dwell together? Yet the morals of others of the period were elastic, pliable, adaptable, especially those of the clergy, who seemed to enjoy impunity.

People forgave much. The Church of Rome had indeed set a bad example. The successors to the Chair of Peter were sullied with the most heinous crimes. Immediately after its political triumph in the time of Constantine, the Church, transformed from Christian into Catholic, had passed through grave schismatic cries and moral crises still more serious. Amiano, historian of the fourth century, describes the bishops of the time who, made rich by the oblations of matrons, rode through the streets seated in their chariots, splendidly arrayed. They were gourmands even beyond the princes of their day.

The reaction to this corruption was shown in monasticism which commenced in Egypt, where the ground had already been prepared by the asceticism of the devotees of Isis and Serapis. After the flowering of the Franciscan period, the degene-

rative impulse of Catholicism became more accentuated. The greatest poets of Italy called down curses on Papal Rome, which had become a putrid sink of all the vices. The Pope synthesized the universal turpitude. Alexander VI of the Borgia family, sinisterly celebrated as a skilled poisoner, was guilty of incest and nepotism. Leo X fixed a tariff for the absolution of sins, and Clement VII maintained a troupe of lascivious women, among them a celebrated African, to solace him in the Vatican. Paul III poisoned his mother. Julius III practised Greek love. Pius V coined a medal to celebrate St. Bartholomew's Eve, when the Catholics spilled the blood of some tens of thousands of Huguenots in Paris.

Sixtus V was an apostle of regicide, in conformity to the doctrine of the Jesuits who through the mouth of their General Mariana, facinus memorabile praised the act of Jacques Clement, assassin of Henri IV, and counselled the assassination of Queen Elizabeth. If the first rulers of the Church, chosen to promote the spiritual salvation of the people, offered such scandalous examples, how could it be expected that the lesser shepherds should rigidly conform to the evangelical morality of resignation, renunciation and penitence? The entire Catholic hierarchy was infected by the Pontiff down to the last cleric in an Alpine village.

The conduct of Emanuel had been tolerated all too willingly, and perhaps this benign tolerance would never have come to an end if the Cardinal had not exasperated the misery of the people with

his gifts to Claudia. The poor feared that Claudia would exhaust the resources of the Principate. Then hunger would come, that real hunger which gives to empty stomachs the terrible pangs of desperation.

The winter was approaching. The mountain trees became yellow and gradually lost their foliage. The cold wind of the Tyrol announced the coming of snow. The deserted autumn fields offered nothing to the miserable persons who went about hunting food. Men's souls were leaden like the skies. The city appeared deserted, abandoned. People talked of the last supper in the castle as of a crime perpetuated to the people's injury. Some were gaily banqueting in the castle, while beyond the Adige hunger was beating with a fearful rhythm at every door.

"They are at it again!" cried Cima in the Tavern of the Moat of San Simonio. "We shall have a series of banquets this year as last. Instead of the Queen of Spain, we now have Claudia. We shall amuse ourselves by picking up crumbs and gnawing bones."

The women in particular were furious. They considered Claudia a fortunate rival, and in their hatred there were elements of envy and jealousy.

Ah! If they could only drag the shameless courtesan through the streets, mark her, like the prostitutes, with a sign, putting on her a saffron ribbon three fingers wide hanging front and back from the shoulders down to the girdle! If they could banish her to a brothel, to the sound of rol-

ling drums and the cracking of whips, as they did with all the other wantons. Or, better yet, erect a pyre in the Cathedral square, a pyre high as a linden tree, a pyre of dry and cracking wood, and place Claudia on it bound to the stake of infamy, and then abandon her to the mortal caresses of the purifying flames!

These desires, engendered by hate, smouldered in the hearts of the matrons of Trent, who, although enjoying much carnal domesticity with the ministers of God, had taken all the precautions which those ministers recommended to preserve appearances. They were not chaste, these matrons of Trent, but they were careful. And they despised Claudia because she had not been able, or had not desired, to hide her relation with Emanuel, but instead had published it and shown herself proud of it.

Claudia meanwhile was methodically putting into execution the plan which she had proposed to herself. She sensed the network of hatred which was daily tightening around her. She read the disdain, the fear, the maledictions which were in the eyes of her courtiers. She must act if she was to break the circle and open up a way of safety for herself. She must act if she was to impose her will on the enemies who were preparing insidious attacks in the shadows, and make them eat the dust.

And the programme of vengeance began. At brief intervals various functionaries of the castle were dismissed. Towards the end of November, Ludovico Particella at the Cardinal's orders condemned two knights to five years' exile. They

were the two who had accompanied the Count di Castelnuovo on the mission to the palace of the Albere. Cima disappeared.

One day the turbid waters of the Adige threw ashore, not far from the bridge of San Lorenzo, the corpse of a priest. It was the theologian.

The cry of assassin was raised. Public rumour, recalling the imprudent words uttered by the theologian at the last banquet in the castle, accused Claudia of having bribed an assassin to bring about the disappearance of the importunate minister of God. The imperial chancellor ordered an inquest without result. It was Claudia who had inspired all these acts of vengeance, great and small. And the Cardinal obeyed, and Ludovico executed.

The solemnity of the Christmas season did not halt the persecutions. Claudia decided to go to the Cathedral for midnight mass. As soon as the Cardinal learned of her rash plan he sought to dissuade her. He begged, implored, but in vain. Nor was Claudia's father more successful.

"You fear for my life, isn't it true?" asked Claudia. "Well, I shall be able to sell it at a high price. No one will dare to touch me. No one will dare to insult me. I know that the crowd will part to let me pass. I am convinced that the noble gentlemen of Trent will not return my defiant glance but will bow their heads at sight of me. It is true that there are the friends of Count Antonio di Castelnuovo, Filiberta's betrothed. Well, even they will not dare to touch me. Christmas Eve does not dispose men to vengeance. There

is a truce to love and hate.....In short, I am not worried about my life."

The Cardinal nevertheless ordered two suzzi to follow Claudia at a discreet distance to protect her against any attack. And Claudia herself took many precautions. She put on an ample tunic of heavy black velvet, bound at the waist by a delicate silken sash. She covered her head with a large zendado which almost hid the entire face. She did not forget to place in her girdle a tiny sharp dagger, whose handle was adorned with precious gems. She took with her a companion a young married woman, wife of a Spanish diplomate sojourning at the time in Trent.

The two women left the castle shortly before midnight and directed their steps towards Santa Maria Maggiore, the church celebrated because of the Council of Trent which was held in it a century previous to the events which we are about to narrate.

The night was cold, clear, starlit. In the streets of Trent there was a great crowd of citizens on their way to the churches to celebrate the nativity of the Redeemer. The bells in the summit of the towers invited the faithful to leave their homes, since the Son of Man was about to be born.

The Christian myth, the Palestinian legend, in those days aroused sweeter sentiments, stronger echoes, profounder longings than now, and the entire city turned out to fill the churches. Santa Maria Maggiore was already full when Claudia arrived. She entered and made her way towards

the high altar. She knelt on the same bench with her companion, clasped her hands, bowed her head and prayed.

It was certainly not the terrible God of Vengeance who piles up horrors and hurls his thunderbolts on miserable man, to whom Claudia prayed in her temporary mystic ecstasy. Not the god of hate, but the God of love.

Claudia invoked pardon for all that she had done. She did not confess her passion but she begged of the God of pity yet a little of life, of repose, of love. The tall candles illuminated the altar and the entire church. The kneeling crowd raised their heads from time to time in expectation of the apparition.

At last the small curtain fell, and in a cradle resplendent with precious stones (how different from the manger of Bethlehem !) appeared the babe, fashioned of wood and plaster. The priests, adorned in their most luxurious vestments, turned towards it.

Claudia glanced at them. She recognized them. Ah ! if the officiating priests knew that Claudia was kneeling on one of the front benches ! Their rotund faces, breathing ease and pleasure, would contract in explosive anger; their voices, which with the grave and deliberate notes of the liturgical melody were consecrating the King of Heaven, would become shrill and exasperated; their hands, now dedicated to court gestures of purification, would be raised to strike the reprobate who dared to defy the Church, even to defy

God.

But none of the priests was aware of Claudia's presence. The ceremony continued its course. A thousand sets of vocal chords vibrated in the closing harmonies and the sonorous waves of sound died away beneath the vast shadowy vaults. The organ accompanied the chorus and lent breadth and profundity to the song. The fumes of incense rose aloft, encompassing the Christ-child with odorous clouds. The hands of the priests were extended towards the crowd as though to clasp the people within their benediction. Men, women and children bowed in expectancy.

In expectancy of what? A miracle? The motionless newborn child in the cradle seemed to be gazing, with its glassy, doll-like eyes at the people who were celebrating the major Christian festival. He could work no miracle. In that church there were men and women who were paralysed, deaf, dumb or blind, and a multitude of sinners, but all these, who had need of divine aid, believed without hope.

The ceremony was ended. The multitude abandoned the church. Claudia, kneeling motionless on the bench, seemed absorbed in a heavenly vision. Her eyes seemed to have concentrated in themselves all the lights of the candles, all the rays of the stars. In her ears vibrated the solemn and melancholy notes of the liturgical hymns, the violent and enervating perfume of the incense which had confused and benumbed her senses. From her mouth issued prayers of desperation, love and

hope. Her whole body was pervaded with the delicious weariness which the mystics of the first centuries of the Christian era must have felt after their translation to Paradise.

Was the fair courtesan, who was hated by the entire people, about to be purified? Was this perhaps the first step on the solitary and deserted road of penitence?

She seemed to see on the flowery hill-sides the flocks gathering about the shepherds, obedient to every sign, every intonation, every syllable.....Why had Emanuel not been able to become once more a good shepherd in the Church?.....Ah! Claudia was the insurmountable obstacle. She must leave Trent and abandon the Cardinal. She must go to a distant land. She must live among unknown folk, and die without vain fears, without sterile regrets. But Claudia, in asking herself these questions or formulating for herself these plans, was merely going through a moment of mystic madness. No! The time had not yet come for mystic abandonment, for solitude, for exile.....Later!

Claudia arose. The church was now deserted. Behind a column of the nave the two suzzi stood on guard. The two women passed the threshold of the church with noiseless step. The church bells had ceased ringing and the streets were deserted. The citizens had returned to their houses and were sitting before their hearths, which were crackling with oak roots.

When Claudia reached the entrance to the quarter of San Marco, a man covered with a great

black cloak crossed the street and raised an arm in which was held a drawn dagger. The lady who accompanied her uttered a shrill cry which brought the suzzi running. Claudia quickly avoided the blow and placed her hand upon the little dagger which was hid in her girdle. The unknown man, having missed his stroke, took to flight.

The suzzi pursued him and caught up with him. Claudia walked on tranquilly.

Arrived at the castle, Claudia commanded the suzzi to bring the prisoner into her presence. Her companion had already retired in panic to her chamber.

In one of the first rooms of the ground floor appeared the reckless one who had attempted the assassination of the courtesan of Trent. He was tightly bound. Claudia ordered the guards first of all to inform no one of the attack. Then she asked the prisoner, who was now upon his knees:

"Who are you? Why did you wish to kill me? What have I done to you? Do you know me?"

The man raised his eyes. They gleamed with a flash of ferocity and hatred. In a low voice he said:

"No doubt you do not know who I am, Signora. But I know you all too well. I am the brother of the theologian who was found on the banks of the Adige a short time ago."

"Well?" interrupted Claudia.

"You had him thrown into the river, and I wished to avenge him and vindicate my family

honour. I regret that my attempt did not succeed. And now I am ready to face your wrath."

"Rise. It is evident that you do not know me. You and many others believe that I thirst for the blood of nobles and plebeians. You are wrong. Your life is in my hands. No one can save you unless I wish it.....Well, I wish it. Do you wish to save yourself?"

"Why did you not save my brother?"

"But do you imagine that I am the cause of his death?"

"The people say so."

"Ah! The people! And you, on the strength of the infamous gossip of the people decided to kill me! Tell me. Do you think you deserve my pardon?"

"I do not wish it."

"Then you prefer imprisonment and death?"

"Yes."

"Miserable man!" cried Claudia. "Yet I pardon you nevertheless. Leave this castle. Go to your home. The feast of Christianity is too gracious to be disturbed with visions of vengeance and blood.....Free this prisoner."

The suzzi obeyed.

"Take him to the door."

The prisoner shivered. What did his eyes express? Gratitude? Hatred?

Claudia returned to her apartment and slept, perhaps for the first time in her life, a tranquil and profound sleep.

CHAPTER XII

"Now let every maid and swain
Hasten here to drink and kiss.
Join with me in one refrain:
Let your hearts consume in bliss.
Fly from pain and trouble:
Life is but a bubble.
Be the scholar e'er so clever,
No one knows about to-morrow.
There is only one real sorrow:
Youth once gone is gone for ever."

In the stanzas of Lorenzo d'Medici, given to the world at the sunrise of the glorious Italian Renaissance, there were and are the expression of that Epicurean attitude towards life which that period substituted for the mystifying Christian doctrine of renunciation. It was the cry of the flesh rebelling against the tyrannical theology which had long subjected the spirit to the absolutism of dogma. It was beginning to be echoed through all the highways and byways of Europe, penetrating to men in palaces and huts, in the plains and the mountains, in the cities and in the fields.

No longer the lengthy speculations of sinners dragging their worn-out bodies towards a distant Thebaid of expiation! No longer the camel's hair,

the whips, the abstinence and the mortification by lice which were ushered in by the Venerable Labre! No longer the desolate solitude of the cloister. Rather the pleasure of the senses which burst forth as a result of the gigantic irony of Gargantua, as though to vindicate something that had been repressed and reviled for centuries. The Church did not resist vice, but combated heresy with blood and with the stake. Thus Paganism, which the Church of Rome had robbed of power, of meaning, of divinity, was perpetuating itself, flourishing especially in Latin lands.

In the spring-time, after the long winter silence, men were flocking to the countryside. The old customs were transmitted unaltered from generation to generation. For example, the March-fires which gleamed on the mountain sides; the tratto-marzo, a ceremony which had fallen into oblivion in the cities but which was still alive in the villages and in the towns among the distant valleys; and later the erogazione, similar in form and motive to the priestly processions of the Pagans who marched to the fields to celebrate the awakening of nature.

The colder winter months were past. March smiled again with its acrid charm. The marvellous days, announcing the spring with the Virgilian clearness of the Italian skies, invited the townsfolk to long excursions in the country.

Claudia had passed the winter in a melancholy mood. Having calmly put her plan in action, she had succeeded in freeing herself from her fiercest enemies and making herself universally feared.

Feared, not loved. In spite of her generous action of Christmas Eve (which the recipient himself had made known, contrary to his promise); in spite of the fact that no more festivals or banquets were held in the castle—still the hatred of all citizens was directed against Claudia. The Cardinal was pitied as the victim of the diabolical evils wrought by the base woman, but her the people would not pardon. And Claudia felt herself continually enmeshed in a thick network of hate, suspicion and calumny.

It was for this reason that in the first days of March she made to the Cardinal a proposal which at first surprised him. Claudia had decided to return to Castel Toblino. Why should she remain in Trent? Her mission was now fulfilled. She had set out to subdue her enemies and she had succeeded. On the other hand, the last stubborn hopes of a favourable response from Rome were vanishing.

The Pope, doubtless at the instigation of the Canons of the Cathedral, would never concede the dispensation which had been invoked with such fervour, with such obstinacy, and at such expense. All the long discussions which Claudia had had with Emanuel in these months had not availed to solve the problem. The Cardinal continued to be irresolute, undecided, weak. He would not resign himself to losing Claudia, but he did not know how to bring about their union. He had aged. He was not unaware of the popular sentiment toward him. People pitied him and cursed him. He would have liked to win back the friendship of his

subjects, to regain a place in their estimation, to obtain their pardon and leave behind a kindly memory of his rule. But to achieve these things it would be necessary to abandon Claudia, to dismiss Ludovico Particella, and to eliminate from his heart his sentiment of friendship for the father and of love for the daughter.

Impossible! Emanuel continued to live from day to day, in the hopeless and absurd expectation of some extraordinary event which would rescue him from a situation which was daily becoming more serious.

And Claudia was beginning to weary of the situation. She felt that the love of former days had vanished. No longer the flames of a grand passion, but a temperate affection, steady and habitual. Her dream of ruling had vanished. The Cardinal's love was not sufficient for her. He was becoming old. Yet he did not have the courage to acknowledge it. It displeased her to cause suffering to a man whom she had loved with all the energy of her soul and whom she still loved in a spirit of gratitude and friendliness which is very rare in women. But the Cardinal did not deceive himself. He divined that Claudia's heart had become for him an empty vessel. And he clung to the still lovely Claudia with the tenaciousness of the ivy implanting its roots in the bark of the oak.

So when Claudia manifested a desire to return to Castel Toblino the Cardinal sought all means to dissuade her. But the courtesan ended, as always, by having her own way.

She felt the need of returning to the fields along the lake which had so often gently cradled her on moonlit summer nights. And she departed without remorse and without hope.

Her departure did not pass unobserved and was greeted with a sigh of satisfaction. The Cardinal remained alone in the castle which was for him from then on, as though uninhabited. He locked himself in his apartment, and passed through a period in which he admitted only his most intimate friends to see him.

From the beginning alarming rumours spread through the city. It was understood that the Cardinal was sick, and Claudia was believed to be the cause. The fishwives who inhabited the alleys in the centre of the town declared to one another, without discussion, that the Cardinal's illness was due to Claudia's sorcery.

The memory of witches and of the famous trials at which they were condemned had been transmitted from father to son. Every one believed in the diabolical power of witches, and the physicians of the epoch joined with the theologians in pawing over the bodies of suspected witches in search of the sigillum diaboli, which would immediately qualify them for the sacred pyre.

But presently the people learned, by means of the inevitable indiscretions, that it was because of Claudia's departure that the Cardinal kept himself locked in his apartment. Then discussion was replaced by jest and ridicule. The Cardinal, old and deprived of authority, became the theme of

popular jokes; he was doing penance for Claudia, and was committing the idiocies of striplings who are taking their first steps in that road which Ovid's Ars amandi pictures with classic perfection. The most biting satires circulated at his expense. At the recurrency of the tratto-marzo scandalous inscriptions appeared upon the walls of the city. The domination of the Madruzzo was ending in the most inglorious manner conceivable: it was dying of ridicule.

Ludovico Particella, although openly opposed by the Cathedral Chapter, remained the political ruler of the Principate. The priests of the Chapter had not yet obtained the papal or imperial intervention which they had insistently invoked. While the Cardinal was passing his melancholy days in Trent, Claudia had taken possession of Castel Toblino. The month of March was nearing its end. The fields were awakening. The woods offered to the eye the light green colour of the first leaves as they break out from the swollen buds at the kiss of the morning dew. And this green covered all the mountain sides, up to the very peaks whose calm asperity was profiled on the horizon. In the air was diffused the warmth of spring. Strange exhalations were brought and spread by the wind. The birds came out from their winter haunts and opened their throats in song. The animals which creep along the earth emerged from their crevices to enjoy the sun. Along the shores of the lake the grass began to grow and the poplars placed a green mantle over their desolate

nudity. Everywhere was the freshness, the suavity, the energy of youth which renews itself perpetually.

Claudia occupied her days in long and lively excursions to the fields and the mountains. Alone, save for the company of a faithful squire, she would emerge at dawn, mount a horse, and gallop furiously as though intoxicated she would gather flowers and plants and stones, and return to the castle deliciously weary, forgetting herself, forgetting everything.

In the evening, when the moon spread its pallid light and the waters of the lake vibrated as though touched by a mysterious caress, Claudia would row out alone in the little boat. In the centre of the lake she would abandon the oars and listen attentively to the profound voices of the night. It seemed to her that they were the voices of the living and of the dead descending from the topmost skies and rising from the utmost depths of the water to celebrate her liberty and her return to solitude.

Her nights were tranquil. Forgetfulness did its silent and tenacious work. She forgot. She forgot friends and enemies, forgot even the Cardinal, whose enfeebled image withered slowly away.

CHAPTER XIII

But if Claudia, by exerting all her efforts, ended by forgetting her enemies, they did not forget her. The Count di Castelnuovo, as we know, had fled to Italy after the tumults in Piazza di Fiera, and for some time had been living in concealment in the house of a friend in the neighbourhood of Pergine. No one suspected his return or his presence in Trent. By means of emissaries pretending to be itinerant cloth merchants he was in continuous and secret relationship with Don Benizio, living in a convent near Bessanone.

The ex-secretary of Prince Emanuel had not forgotten Trent. His forced seclusion had excited his passions. For some months the priests had been living in the expectation of revenge. He was seeking the means—a man who would obey his command to assassinate. Claudia must die!

This was the design which obsessed Don Benizio. The months which he had passed in the convent had not healed his wounds, for they were old, past healing. Yet at the beginning he had sought to forget, abandoning himself to all the privations of a fierce novitiate. He had scourged his flesh with lead-knotted whips. He had fasted to the point of danger of death from starvation. He had slept upon the bare ground, his slumber haunted

by perverse visions. He had followed the minutest prescriptions of the spiritual exercises of expiation.

Useless! After the flagellation, while his livid flesh was swelling under the bloody lashes, the image of Claudia would leap before his eyes. Claudia nude, quivering, seductive, offering the mortal caresses of Cleopatra!

Even after obstinate fasts, while the pangs of abstinence were torturing his stomach and obscuring his vision, the obsession would not disappear. Instead the obscene image became yet brighter, more provoking, more seductive.

Then Don Benizio would take counsel with the Prior. He wished to purify himself, to forget. And the Prior would order him to recite long prayers. But, while his lips were stammering the Latin verses and his clasped hands were outstretched above him, Claudia appeared to interrupt the prayer.

Don Benizio realized that all attempts were useless. Claudia had taken complete possession of his soul. He must yield.

Then Don Benizio felt his soul palpitate with hatred. Claudia had robbed him of his peace on earth, and threatened to deprive him of his entry into Paradise. Ah, no. It could not be a sin to kill this woman who was the cause of so many evils. The obsession of Claudia alternated with the obsession of vengeance. He recalled his conversation and his threats in Castel Toblino. And he recalled likewise the disdainful and sarcastic manner in which Claudia had repelled him.

"I shall come to fetch you," the private secretary of Emanuel Madruzzo had said, "as booty of war. I shall not have pity on you. I shall abandon you to the city mob which hates you with a deadly hatred and will massacre you in the streets."

The day could not be far off. But where could he find a man willing to risk his life? Don Benizio every week received minute information concerning the most important events in the affairs of Trent. The attempted assassination of Claudia on Christmas Eve had made a deep impression on him. Not all were cowards, then. There was some one who dared to arm his hand with the dagger of vengeance. Claudia's pardon had been a clever, although not very successful, simulation.

No, Claudia would never pardon any one. Her pardon had concealed a greater trap. The thought of making use of this man, who had attempted to avenge the death of his brother, haunted Don Benizio. He mentioned it to an emissary from the Count di Castelnuovo, and the latter immediately instituted a search for Paolo Martelli (such was the name of the brother of the theologian who had been drowned in the Adige). He wished to meet him and tell him of the proposal.

Paolo Martelli succeeded in evading the vigilance of the guards, and disguised as a chimney-sweep went to Pergine, in the vicinity of which the Count di Castelnuovo was living in concealment. The conversation was brief. The Count promised material and moral support. Concerning the plan

and its execution, it was decided that Martelli should go to Bressanone, disguised as usual as an itinerant pedlar, and make final arrangements with Don Benizio. A few days later Martelli left Trent.

Walking afoot, in short stages, he reached Bressanone and sought out Don Benizio's monastery. When the priest found himself in Martelli's presence, he could not restrain a cry of wonder and satisfaction. Martelli betrayed in his manner his surprise at finding Don Benizio so changed in face and worn out in health. After the conventional preliminaries, Don Benizio took his companion by the hand and said:

"Let us not talk here of the affairs that interest us. It would be imprudent. Let us go to my cell. There we can arrange everything without being disturbed."

"As you wish," declared Martelli, and followed Don Benizio.

They traversed the courtyard which was as denuded of grass as that of a prison. They then made their way towards one end of the building rising at the extremity of the convent. They reached Don Benizio's cell and took seats.

The priest's eyes had resumed their sinister gleam. He confidentially grasped his guest's hand and as the latter glanced about him with the air of one not completely at his ease, Don Benizio said: "Fear nothing. The brothers are nearly all away from the convent, hunting in the fields. Besides, this is not the first time I have received the emissaries of the Count di Castelnuovo in this cell.

"Permit me," continued Don Benizio, "to congratulate you upon what you did on Christmas Eve."

Martelli showed himself not a little astonished at the compliment.

"Oh," continued the priest, "do not search now for the cause of my feeling of admiration for your act. Courageous men are very few. No one rebels, but all resign themselves stupidly to the dominion of this ill-starred woman. You are an exception, and perhaps on this account the subtle hand of Claudia Particella refrained from writing your death sentence. But all that is past. You know what affair we have in hand?"

"We are already agreed."

"With whom?"

"With the Count di Castelnuovo."

"And you are decided?"

"Firmly."

"Soon?"

"Very soon. As soon as possible."

"Have you pondered on the means?"

"No; and it is about this that we must talk."

"Permit me," interrupted Don Benizio again. He was recovering the subtle perfidy of the intriguer that he was. "Permit me to say that I have been thinking of you continuously and have absolute confidence in your courage and your patriotism. At bottom, this is not a matter of my personal satisfactions, but of a duty towards our ruined land. You will have no scruples.....?"

"None. I am alone in the world. I had a brother whom I loved. One day they found his

corpse on the shore of the Adige. Someone must have thrown him into the river—some hired assassin of Claudia's. I lose nothing in risking my life a second time. And I can be useful to my country. I repeat: the Count di Castelnuovo has sent me to you that we may agree upon the execution of this project of ours. Continue."

Don Benizio was beaming with joy. He had found the instrument of his revenge. This man of energetic build and resolute gestures would not hesitate. Don Benizio was touching his lips to the cup of vengeance. He would drink it to the dregs.

After a brief pause the priest continued:

"Do you know where Claudia is at the present moment?

"At Castel Toblino. She has been living there a month."

"And the Cardinal?"

"Has remained in Trent."

"I see that you are well informed. You must strike Claudia at Castel Toblino. Perhaps you will find the matter very difficult."

"Difficult, but not impossible."

"Then I see that we understand each other."

Don Benizio approached nearer Martelli and lowered his voice. The confidences which were about to pass his lips were terrible. No one must hear them! Not even that melancholy Christ in wood which was hanging from the wall!

Without a tremor in his voice the priest said:

"It is necessary to kill Claudia. You will go

to the Castel Toblino and take note of Claudia's habits. You will take lodgings in the house of some peasant near the castle. It will not be difficult, especially if you pay.

"When you approach the castle, and especially when you leave, you will take care that no one recognizes you. For this purpose buy yourself a false beard. They will end by thinking you an itinerant merchant, a foreigner.

"Claudia used to take a turn in her rowboat every evening on the lake. Good. Go every evening to the opposite shore and hire a boat. Thus you may approach Claudia. When you find her alone, after having politely begun to converse with her, leap suddenly into her boat.....You have surely understood me without adding a word.

"The action must be, above all, rapid. When you are sure that the blow has succeeded you will make your escape through the woods. It will not be difficult to reach Italy in safety. We shall not forget you. Claudia's death may be the cause of serious upheavals in the affairs of the Principate. It may be the signal for the crisis which is already approaching an acute phase. Do not imagine that I am making an absurd prophecy when I tell you that you may return to Trent not as a criminal but as a liberator. Not a voice will be raised to lament Claudia. Not a tear will moisten the eye of a single citizen. No prayer will beg God's mercy on the obstinate sinner."

At this point the priest heard a voice from the innermost depths of his conscience. A shudder

of terror traversed his blood. Perhaps he felt remorse at obliging another to commit a sin. Perhaps he felt shame for his fearful machination, which would obliterate a life in defiance of the prohibition expressed in the fourth commandment of the Mosaic-Christian code: *Thou Shall not Kill.*

But this painful sentiment passed off quickly, overcome by the feeling of hatred and the desire for vengeance. He continued in a low voice to glorify this crime as one committed not on account of a luxurious woman, but for the liberty of a people. He insisted diabolically on this point, knowing that with it he could more easily convince the assassin.

The latter, by nature religious and bigoted, had listened to the whole plan contrived by Don Benizio with the profound attention of a believer receiving a message from the other world. Don Benizio, like all priests who bear hatred in their breasts, knew how to dominate by suggestion. Otherwise it would be impossible to explain the confidence which the Cardinal had reposed in him, a confidence which was never belied despite strong evidence to the contrary. It would have endured indefinitely had Don Benizio not participated in the search for the corpse of Filiberta, buried in the subterranean crypts of the Convent of the Holy Trinity.

To seal the conversation, Don Benizio took down the crucifix from the wall and asked Martelli to swear to keep secret all that had passed between them, and to put his project into execution without

delay. The assassin took the oath. Don Benizio then accompanied him to the refectory of the convent and begged him to refresh himself abundantly before commencing the long return journey.

In the evening at sundown Martelli left Bressanone. He was furnished with a letter of recommendation from Don Benizio, who had a wide acquaintance among the parish priests of the Tyrol and the Altasina valley. The recommendation of Don Benizio would open to Martelli the doors of all the canon's residences, where in those days one ate, drank and slept most agreeably.

By short stages, well received by the prelates, Martelli reached Trent and thence betook himself immediately to Pergine to confer with the Count di Castelnuovo and communicate to him the result of his colloquy with Don Benizio. Antonio di Castelnuovo assented. It seemed to him unchivalrous to kill a woman, but this sentiment was drowned in the memory of Filiberta calling for vengeance. He furnished Martelli with money.

Martelli left Trent and directed his steps toward Castel Toblino. Three men were spinning the mortal conspiracy against Claudia Particella, who, all unknowingly, continued to pass her days merrily in the fields, in the mountains above, and in the woods, already green and a-whisper with the chirrup of nesting birds.

CHAPTER XIV

These days were days of horrible waiting for Don Benizio and the Count di Castelnuovo. Whenever a horse stamped before the monastery, whenever a passer-by knocked on the massive cloister door, he rushed into the reception room in the hope that an unknown man would bring the happy news.

A week passed. Martelli arrived at Castel Toblino one evening at sundown. The Guidicarie road was deserted, for the cloudy sky threatened rain and the sirocco wind from the south raised clouds of dust which spread over the surrounding fields. The lake was agitated.

Martelli begged hospitality for the night at the house of a peasant family dwelling in the immediate vicinity of the castle. The good farmers were not surprised at the meditative manner of the stranger. They offered hospitality to many wayfarers whom the night surprised in those parts. But they were surprised when the stranger mentioned that he would pay for his lodging. He seated himself at the humble board upon which the housewife had placed the steaming cornmeal, and ate.

The peasants, with that timid and obstinate curiosity which characterizes them, risked several questions, and the guest replied with the greatest frankness and cordiality. But the suspicions of

the peasants, especially of the aged head of the family, returned when Martelli requested information concerning Claudia's habits, and asked whether it was possible now and then to rent a boat. The peasants, who had at times been the beneficiaries of Claudia's bounty in the form of money and cast-off clothes, magnified the virtues of their protectress but furnished none of the particulars which Martelli hoped for. The peasant is by nature cautious, circumspect, diffident.

Martelli was then accompanied to his bed in a simple rustic room, provided with huge furniture which had perhaps been fashioned in that same house with the rude tools of primitive artisans. Beneath on the first floor the others remained—the aged head of the family, with a long white beard, somewhat disordered, and penetrating and vivacious eyes; one of those sons of the soil who possess an iron constitution not to be crushed by long days and years of heavy toil: beside him the eldest son, a square-shouldered masculine type of rustic beauty; his mother, who in spite of her dried-up skin and her scanty hair preserved something of the energy of youth.

"I tell you," said the old man, who seemed very worried and hid his fingers in his beard, "I tell you that the fellow is suspicious. He brings us bad luck."

"We have taken in others who looked worse than he does," interrupted the old woman. "And, anyway, he is paying us."

The last statement, which revealed the calculat-

ing house-wife, did not greatly move the old man.

"But you surely don't want to get compromised for the sake of a few pennies," he said.

"Don't worry, father," said the young man, who had been following the conversation with great interest. "To-night I shall keep watch on the stranger. We have nothing to fear. He does not know us and has no reason for personal vengeance against us. And woe to him if he did. Woe to him if a single one of your sheep is missing to-morrow. Woe to him to-morrow morning if I don't find all the lambs in the barn, now that Easter is drawing near. Woe, woe to him if anything is missing in our house. I will follow him and punish him as he deserves."

The young peasant underlined these words with great and indignant gestures. The old man replied:

"Anyway, don't you sleep too soundly. If there is the slightest sound, get up and give the alarm."

The three worried peasants retired to their rooms and slept. They slept badly, although the night passed without any incidents of note. They heard no unusual sounds, except the roaring of the south wind.

In the morning none of the sheep or lambs was missing from the barn. The peasants, reassured concerning their guest, paid him many compliments when he descended from his room. After having broken the bread of friendship they said farewell. The entire family saluted their departing

guest, wishing him god-speed and good fortune.

The day was quiet, warm and clear. The wind had driven away all the clouds, and upon the free horizon could be clearly discerned the topmost mountain peaks. From the fields came waves of perfume, snatches of songs sung by the ploughmen at the top of their voices, the cries of birds shooting like arrows from the woods up toward the heavens, and the sounds of the horns which the shepherds blow when approaching their flocks on the high mountains. The chimneys of the castle sent their curling smoke up into the ineffable, the inexpressible clearness of the morning sky. All the windows of the castle were open. The doves were chasing one another around the towers.

Nature, both animate and inanimate, smiled at life. But one man of circumspect step and pensive manner was dominated by the idea of death. Martelli, wearing a false beard, took the Giudicarie road, passed beyond the castle, cast a glance at the highway, cut through into the fields, and reached the other side of the lake. He approached a rude cabin in front of which a small boat was made fast with large ropes.

He knocked. No one replied. The boatman was absent. Perhaps he had gone to cut wood in the forest. Martelli patiently awaited his return.

Toward noon a tall, hairy fellow, with eyes almost buried beneath his eyebrows, made his appearance at the door of the cabin. He was armed with a large, shining pruning-fork. In a savage voice, suggesting that he had little to do with

him, he said to Martelli:

"Who are you?"

Then he waited in expectation, raising his hand menacingly in the air. Martelli, somewhat impressed but not frightened, made a polite gesture and replied:

"I am a wayfarer."

"What do you want here?"

"What I need."

"But this is the hut of a boatman who lives by carrying wood to the other shore of the lake. I have nothing...."

"Excuse me, my good man," said Martelli, now completely reassured, "I haven't yet asked you for anything. If you wish to be useful to me I shall be grateful and you will be paid for it. If afterwards...."

But the boatman did not give him time to finish. He had become tame at the vague probability of money.

"Oh, stay here, I beg you. I cannot, however, dare to offer to share my misery with you."

"Do not worry about that, my good friend."

The boatman opened the door of his cabin and the two entered. The cabin was built of stones and mud. In the centre was a fire-place. In a corner was a primitive bed, and here and there odds and ends of the boatman's trade, bits of broken skiffs, oars, ropes and a red sail which covered the entire wall opposite the door. In this wall an axe had been sunk, and the sight struck the visitor unpleasantly. The other walls were covered

with smoky and weather-beaten sacred images.

Martelli cast a rapid glance at the place. It revealed the disordered characteristics of the homes of those who live alone.

Then Martelli drew near to his host and, looking him straight in the eye, said:

"I have just one thing to ask you."

The face of the boatman became an enormous question mark. Vague fears crossed his mind. The fear of sorcerers was widely diffused in those days and every suspect individual ran the risk of being considered one. It was a very serious danger because it led to the flames and the stake. Martelli did not, however, perceive the uneasiness which had seized his interlocutor, and continued:

"What I am going to ask you is nothing extraordinary....listen to me, my good friend. Can you let me have your boat this evening? I shall need it for a few hours. Just enough time to get to the centre of the lake."

"Perhaps I ought to go with you," interrupted the boatman.

"That's not necessary. Tell me instead how much you want."

"Oh, don't worry about that for the moment," replied the boatman. "There is always time to pay. Can I offer you a mouthful of bread? The noon bell has already rung, if I am not mistaken."

The two men began to eat. The bread was black and dry, a primitive mixture of wheat and corn. For a few moments there was no sound save that of crunching jaws. Then the innate diffidence

of the mountaineer was overcome and the boatman hazarded a few questions.

"Why do you need a boat to go to the middle of the lake?"

The embarrassing question did not disturb Martelli. He was a fellow of small wit, but in this moment an evil spirit suggested a clever lie.

"Listen, my good friend. What I am about to tell you is a rather long story and will seem strange to you. But what strange things happen in this world!" This philosophical reflection, followed by a studied pause, gave Martelli the time and the means to put his thoughts in order.

"Many years ago—fourteen if my memory does not deceive me—my family was afflicted with an irreparable misfortune. In this lake my fourteen-year-old brother, who was making an excursion with some friends of his own age, was drowned."

The boatman passed his hand over his forehead. A tale of this sort had been told to him once before. His interest and his curiosity was increased.

"I will not tell you of my sorrow, nor of the pain which my family experienced. I was eighteen, and all my youth was passed in sorrow. I still suffer from the memory.

"A year ago, on the anniversary of the unhappy accident, something happened to me which may astonish you."

The boatman's eyes were illuminated with a strange curiosity.

"I was asleep and I dreamed of this brother who was drowned. He was clad in white. He seemed to me infinitely beautiful. In a gentle voice he reproved me for having forgotten him. He begged me to commemorate his tragic end henceforward by going in a boat to the spot where he was drowned. I promised. And as you see, I have come this year for the first time to fulfil my vow and to keep my promise."

The boatman believed the tale. Martelli's story was not improbable. The man was too primitive to discern the falsity of the fable. The conversation continued on unimportant topics.

Towards evening, while his host was away, Martelli walked far up the shore. His eyes were fixed on the opposite shore. The church bell rang. The first stars appeared. But no boat set forth from the castle beach. The assassin was desolate.

Yet the weather was not threatening. Rather it offered an invitation to all to come out on the lake, which in the evening hours was gathering to its bosom the last reflections from the sky.

Why did Claudia remain concealed in the castle? This useless question tortured Martelli. He decided to set forth in his boat. He rowed vigorously, arrived beneath the walls of the castle, and waited long. But in vain! When he saw the lights appear in the windows he understood that his attempt was hopeless. In a melancholy mood he returned to the boatman's hut.

After a very modest supper he lay down on an improvised pallet and pretended to go to sleep.

He pretended sleep in order not to awaken fear and suspicion in the breast of the boatman. But instead of the sleep which restores he experienced a wakefulness which tortured him with cold shivers. He stared with wide-opened eyes into space as though to penetrate the mystery of the thick darkness and to find the word of destiny. The boatman was sleeping. His sleep was heavy, noisy. The good man was far from suspecting the tempest which was shaking the soul of his guest with dubious theories and supposititious plans.

Should he depart? Should he remain? And, in the latter case, what excuse should he offer? How could he convince the boatman? And if the latter should become panic-stricken and denounce him to the functionaries of the castle? Or if he should kill him in order to rob him? Martelli asked himself, Could he return to Trent and inform Don Benizio and the Count di Castelnuovo of the result of his enterprise?

After much thought he decided to remain. The next day he would pretend to be sick and would beg hospitality for another day.

In the morning he complained of a vague illness. He told the boatman that in this condition he felt obliged to postpone his departure for at least another day. The boatman rushed to a nearby house and brought him some milk.

CHAPTER XV

The day passed. Towards evening, Martelli said that he felt better and asked for the boat, saying that he wished to make another excursion in it. The boatman was somewhat hesitant....

"You are sick, signore! You cannot manage the oars and guide the boat. Let me go with you."

"No," replied Martelli with decision. "No, thank you; it isn't necessary, I feel fairly well, and a short trip on the lake will fix me up perfectly."

"Signore," insisted the boatman, "I wouldn't want to be, even indirectly, the cause of any accident. Please let me go with you."

"No; I will beckon you in case of necessity. Do not leave the beach."

The boatman was persuaded. Nevertheless he untied an old rowboat which had been beached and tied with rusty chains. Martelli took the other bark and rowed vigorously toward the centre of the lake.

Night fell, and from the mountains the sunset shadows covered the valleys. He felt the delicious hour which inspired Dante to write the immortal terzine:

"It was that hour, which thaws the heart, and sends
The voyagers' affection home, when they
Since morn have said Adieu to darling friends;
And smites the new-made pilgrim on his way
With love, if he a distant bell should hear,
That seems a-mourning for the dying day."

There was no boat except Martelli's on the lake. He felt himself alone on the mirror of water and was already despairing.

It seemed to him very difficult, if not impossible to reach Claudia. Only chance could bring him success.

Meanwhile the moon had risen above the horizon, veiled in tenuous vapours. No sound disturbed the silence of the first hours of night. The windows of the castle were illuminated. Then the lights were extinguished. Martelli believed that his undertaking had again failed, and the thought of his impotence gnawed his heart. How could he face the Count di Castelnuovo? And Don Benizio, who was suffering spasms of expectancy?

Suddenly he discerned a rowboat departing from the shore beneath the castle. He heard the splash of the water as the boat took off. Claudia was accompanied by Rachele. No matter. He would try to strike her nevertheless. The boat drew near.

Claudia's boat headed toward the little island in the midst of the lake. Martelli clutched the oars and sought to cut off the path of the two women.

But now a second boat slid into the water from the castle shore. It was filled with young girls and gay young men. Then another boat with a group of singers, and still another with four soldiers of the castle garrison. The rattling of the closing doors echoed over the lake. The lights flashed for a moment behind the closing windows. Then nothing.

Meanwhile the boats were making their way toward the island. The man who remained for a moment concealed, the man dominated by the green demon of vengeance, was not far off. He could count the number of persons in the other boats....Their plumed caps revealed them as courtiers in Claudia's service. Something glittered in the singers' boat. It was their lutes.

And Claudia was first in the row. Martelli decided. He abandoned his oars, the better to watch. But someone had observed his presence. The guards rowed furiously towards him.

Flee? No. It would be worse, Wait, then!

When the soldiers' boat drew near, a man holding a long shining halberd cried to Martelli:

"Who goes there?"

"A fisherman."

"By moonlight?"

"As you like."

"Where do you live?"

"Over there. Can you see that cabin?"

"All right," concluded the soldier in a voice that admitted of no dispute. "Get away from here."

"I obey."

Martelli rowed away. He understood that resistance was useless.

Just beyond rose a little rock the point of which emerged from the water like a gigantic claw. He hid himself in the tiny bay formed by the rock and waited.

No one saw him. No one suspected his presence. The distance between the rock and the island on which Claudia had landed with her companions was but a few steps.

Martelli couldn't see the courtiers, but he could distinctly hear their merry dialogue. When Claudia spoke, every one else was silent. Her voice had the strange sonorous limpidness of a string plucked by a divine hand. He thought, the merry party must by now be seated on the fresh grass which is sprouting under the vernal breeze.

Someone was relating in a low voice something that amused the others, for loud bursts of laughter interrupted the narrative from time to time. But the story-teller spoke in a confidential tone.

What stories is he telling? The usual ones. Love, intrigue, surprises, disillusionments. Young men fooled by gay and provocative widows. Husbands receiving the horns of cuckoldry from their modest wives enjoying pious and Christian relations with jovial monks. Old men searching for bitter fruits in the last spasms of declining virility. And all of them rascals scheming one against another.

And all this recounted without reticence. Evi-

dently we are in the century of erotic literature. Then is heard the tinkle of cups. Claudia is drinking and raising her glass to heaven to cry:

"I drink to forgetfulness."

"To hope," cries a page.

"To love," exclaims a courtier.

"To the moon," sings a poet.

Why is Claudia drinking to forgetfulness? Has the fair courtesan then decided to forget her past? And is this night perhaps her final farewell to the first part of her life? Is the expiation about to begin? What expiation?

No. Claudia did not wish to do penance because she was not conscious that she had sinned. Her sins were sins of love, and God is strangely merciful toward the fair novitiates of the mysteries of Eros.

What, then, did Claudia wish to forget? The Cardinal, Emanuel Madruzzo? This lover of hers is already old and seeks in vain to prolong the April of youth long past. Claudia feels toward him a debt of gratitude. She is sensible of a friendly, sisterly affection which no longer feels the furious explosions, the unexpected jealousies, the dominating ambitions of aforetime. Claudia is young, and the fever of new loves warms her blood. Forget? Will it be possible? Is it possible to cancel, by force of will, what was the finest essence of our life?

But this Claudia who raises a cup filled with the perfumed wine of Isera, this Claudia does not crave absolute, eternal forgetfulness. She craves a sur-

cease, a parenthesis. She longs for an oasis of freshness in the flame-stricken desert of her passions. She drinks to forgetfulness, thinks Martelli. Ah, good. But it is difficult for evil womankind to forget. It is hard for her to still the voice of a thousand remorses.

Meanwhile the harmonies of lutes floated from the island. The night was clear, luminous, profound. The moon was already on the horizon. The lutes sighed faintly as though invoking a response from nearby souls; then they quivered like springs trickling from Alpine rocks. The harmony concluded with a long, solemn, majestic note.

A few moments of silence. Then the music took up again its elegiac motif. The three singers intoned a ballata:

> "Come, fair page, come and draw near to me;
> Pluck from your harmonious lyre
> Those sweet sounds which touch within the soul
> Secret springs of fond desire."

The chorus had the long cadences of the mediaeval songs. The singers became silent. A courtier arose and spoke:

"Claudia, Madonna Signora, let not my homage be displeasing to you. You know that I am among the few who have always defended you against unjust calumnies and poisonous insinuations. Here there are no enemies. The hour is solemn, unforgettable. Receive, fair queen, my

profound reverence. Were I an orator, I should wish to weave a discourse in your praise. Were I a poet, I should sing your beauties. But I am but a knight, and I offer my arm in your defence so long as it is able to brandish mace and sword."

The knight was mistaken. The enemy was not far distant. Martelli listened to the speeches. He trembled with impotent rage. Claudia replied:

"Most acceptable is your homage to me, O knight, nor have I ever doubted your devotion. Yet forget not our common enemies. If I have dispersed many of them, if the most quarrelsome now bite the dust....well, I shall continue."

At this veiled threat Martelli sprang up. He drew his dagger from his belt, thinking: the courtesan is then not satiated with vengeance. But perhaps she is mistaken.

Martelli rowed the bark noiselessly toward the island. The wine and the merry discourses distracted attention and caused all precautions to be forgotten.

When Martelli, unnoticed, set foot on the island and crept behind a thick hedge, he saw Claudia and her courtiers, men and women, reclining on the ground on carpets brought from the castle for that purpose. Claudia was in the centre. The men and women encircled her. Not far off the halberdiers were drinking suspecting nothing. Martelli crept slowly, like a reptile, until he was but a few feet from Claudia. While he was preparing to make a feline leap to strike Claudia, a knight saw him and uttered a cry of alarm. The

assassin was lost. Nevertheless he flung himself upon Claudia. But Rachele covered her mistress's body with her own, and the murderous blade plunged into the poor girl's breast.

Instantly, guards, pages and knights overpowered the assassin. They bound him tightly and threw his helpless body into a boat. The women gathered about the stricken girl.

"It is nothing," Rachele said. "Do not worry about me, Signora, I shall recover."

A river of blood stained her white garments. Claudia, although weeping with sorrow and rage, herself gathered up the carpets and placed them in the bottom of a boat. Upon them she gently placed Rachele.

Thence the sad cortege proceeded to the castle. Martelli was thrown into a secret cell, dark and damp. Rachele was put to bed and lovingly watched over the whole night. The castle physician declared that he believed the wound was not mortal. Claudia had not desired even to see the assassin and had not slept.

"The wretch will pay dearly."

CHAPTER XVI

The next morning Martelli was brought before Claudia. He kept his head lowered and his glance upon the ground. But Claudia, after peering intently at him, exclaimed:

"I recognize you! I recognize you!.... Enough. Take him back to prison!" she commanded to the soldiers.

The assassin said nothing. The same day Claudia wrote a long letter to the Cardinal, informing him in detail of what had happened, and demanding authorization to have him condemned to death. The letter, carried by a special courtier, reached Trent the evening of the same day.

The Cardinal, contrary to Claudia's expectation, did not reply promptly. He wished first of all to consult various influential personages. He had a long interview with Ludovico Particella. But Claudia, wishing to be obeyed, sent another message. Emanuel, undecided and irresolute as usual, gave in.

Four days after the tragic scene Rachele's condition was satisfactory and gave hope of a speedy recovery. Claudia took counsel with one of the wisest of her courtiers and fixed the conditions of Martelli's trial. A pretence of a court, and a pretence of accusation and defence.

The accused spoke no word. Not with a single gesture did he betray any concern for himself. He did not reply to the questions, did not defend himself, did not entreat pardon. When the sentence of death was read to him he retained his statuesque immobility.

"I would have pardoned you a second time," exclaimed Claudia, "if you had not wounded a person who is very dear to me and who has done naught to deserve it. But since pardon does not disarm you and dispel from your heart its sentiment of hatred and desire for vengeance, you will pay with your life for your bloody crime."

Thus ran the sentence. Martelli listened impassively. He was then imprisoned again in the secret cell of the castle to await the last hour.

The boatman, upon hearing of what had happened, disappeared, fearing that he would be compromised for having accorded hospitality to the stranger.

Martelli passed several days in expectation. His cell was located at the end of a subterranean passage which led to the lake. When the water was rough he could distinctly hear the sound of the waves. The condemned man passed his time in thought. Almost every morning he received a visit from a friar who was to prepare him for death. He was tortured by the thought of having struck an innocent person. Truly, Claudia must be defended and protected by some malign diabolical spirit. Not idle was the rumour, which had spread among the people of Trent, that she was a sorceress.

Was there no way of striking her down?—that was the question which came most frequently to the lips of the condemned man. And his accomplices, what were they thinking? Very probably they were already informed of the unsuccessful outcome of the enterprise, and certainly could not attribute it to cowardice on the part of the assassin. He had been, rather, too reckless.

Thus passed several days. The condemned man could not explain to himself the cause of the delay in executing the sentence. What were they waiting for? Did they wish to torture him still more? Did they wish him to experience the sensation of death and suffer all the subtle spasms of a terrible agony before placing his neck beneath the executioner's axe? And the refinement of this punishment which he imagined was being meted out to him, increased tenfold the hatred in his soul.

But Martelli was mistaken. The delay was due to Rachele. The good girl had pardoned the assassin and had insistently begged Claudia to reprieve him. Rachele could not endure the simple idea of vengeance. The devoted maiden whom Claudia kept ever by her side was one of those straightforward natures springing from the common people, quick to take vengeance, yet still more ready to forgive and forget. Rachele forgave Martelli. The wound was healing, and with the passing of the acute pain the resentment passed away likewise.

"Pardon him," she begged Claudia. "I know, my dear lady, that you showed mercy on another occasion. Yet, I beg you, be prodigal of your

mercy. Make it evident to him and to the whole people that your heart beats with pity for the miseries of your fellow men. Show them that you harbour no evil sentiment, but only compassion for the wickedness of mankind."

The girl's words expressed a profound desire. She continued:

"You know, signora, the idea that this man, that a human being, should die because of me...."

"Oh, no," interrupted Claudia. "Not because of you. He deserves exemplary punishment. And anyway, my good Rachele, you cannot believe that another act of clemency on my part would reform the wretch who pierced you with his dagger. You cannot dream of such a thing. He is obstinate. He is a dangerous man who will seek to do the same thing to-morrow."

"O my lady, do not believe that this man's perversity is so great. I fear that if he is executed his ghost will come to haunt us by night and sadden our lives. Pardon him!"

Rachele's exhortations did not, in the first days, shake Claudia's irrevocable decision. She had received regular authorization from the Cardinal to have the sentence executed. Ah, no! This Martelli, who had already sought on Christmas Eve to kill her, this man who despite her forgiveness had continued jealously to nourish his sanguinary plans of vengeance, this wretch who had lied to obtain the hospitality of a lonely fisherman, this crafty assassin who had transformed a merry gathering into a bloody tragedy—surely this man

deserved no pity. He had plunged headlong into the whirlpool and it had engulfed him.

Claudia was not disposed to forgive. But Rachele's insistence was redoubled. The good girl had already left her bed, and after a few days of convalescence would resume her usual occupations. She did not despair of convincing her mistress, whose innate goodness she knew by experience.

One mild April evening, during Rachele's first walk in the garden, she repeated her request:

"Hear me, my dear lady, and grant my prayer. I am happy to have saved your life. And I should not have felt the least regret if the blow had been fatal. I should have left the world happy to have made my body a shield to protect you against the violent snares of your enemy.

"But now that all is happily past, now that the tragic evening remains nothing but a memory, forgive the unhappy man who is awaiting his last day on earth. Show yourself generous and I will continue to serve you in all humility and with deep love, as though I were serving Our Lady herself."

These words issuing from a pure heart moved Claudia. She owed a great debt of gratitude to the faithful maid. And she ended by yielding to her desire.

"I shall try to pardon him," said Claudia, "and I shall pardon him in your name. But this cannot happen soon. When you are quite well you shall yourself go to the wretch's cell and

inform him of my pardon. Not I. I could not endure the sight of that evil and ungrateful man."

"Oh, signora," exclaimed Rachele, "you are infinitely kind."

"I am doing it for you," added Claudia.

"My gratitude to you, my dear lady. Now I shall sleep tranquilly, without bad dreams."

Rachele, profoundly moved, covered Claudia's hands with kisses.

Two weeks passed. For a month now Martelli had remained in the darkness of the secret cell. He had utterly abandoned hope. Yet why this long delay? Martelli imagined that his friends, knowing of the situation, were using every means on his behalf.

Not at all. Few had been told of the events which took place on the island in the lake of Castel Toblino. Don Benizio and the Count di Castelnuovo knew nothing of it at all. The delay in the execution of the sentence of death was due to the pardon which had been invoked and obtained.

But Martelli was far from believing in Claudia's forgiveness. Great, then, was his surprise when one morning he saw the door of the cell opened at an unusual hour. And it was not the friar who appeared, mumbling his long prayers, but Rachele accompanied by a woman and two halberdiers.

A month of prison had altered still more the lines of the recluse's face. His eyes glanced fiercely about him. His hair fell in filthy bunches over his shoulders. His whole figure was bent, shrunk,

aged. This man, in the horrible expectation of death, had become the mere shadow of his former self, a terrifying shade.

Struck by the sight, Rachele hesitated a few instants on the threshold, motionless and speechless. Then she approached the condemned man and in a slightly altered voice, which betrayed her great inner commotion, the good girl asked:

"Do you know me?" Martelli raised his eyes to her, gazed long at her, and in sepulchral accents replied:

"No."

"You remember me," the girl insisted. "What you did is not so long ago."

Martelli bent his head and uttered no word. The memory was too painful to him. He drew back from Rachele and turned his face towards the window, a mere hole in the wall, through which filtered the delicate rays of the morning sun.

"Do you remember your condemnation?" asked the girl. She was somewhat frightened by the strange manner and the threatening attitude of the recluse.

"I remember," he said laconically.

"And are you not afraid to die?" asked Rachele with feminine ingenuousness.

"No," Martelli responded dryly.

"Don't you want to live?"

"Little."

"Don't you regret what you did?"

"Yes; because I missed my mark."

"Did you know the woman whom you tried

to kill?"

"She whom I tried to kill? Oh, I have known her long. But she who warded off the blow was, and remains to me unknown."

"And if the unknown woman should forgive you and obtain for you a pardon, would you still cherish the hatred which impelled you to commit your evil deed?"

"No."

"Well, I am the woman who saved Claudia. Your dagger pierced my flesh. I have forgiven you and have obtained Claudia's pardon for you."

Martelli did not at first seem moved. Then a trace of colour reddened his emaciated cheeks and a flash of satisfaction gleamed in his eyes. Life resumed its dominion over death. The instinct of self-preservation was released, although held in check by an iron will.

"My gratitude to you," stammered the prisoner. Then he asked:

"Your pardon is unconditional?"

"There is a single condition," Rachele replied. "Either you must enter a monastery or leave the Principate."

It was Claudia who had imposed these conditions. And she had imposed them because it was repugnant to her to infringe the law which punished assassins and would-be assassins.

Martelli remained a while deep in thought. Then he said:

"Permit me time to make my choice."

He raised a grateful glance to Rachele as she

was leaving the cell. The heavy iron door closed.

Rachele heard the creaking of the great hinges, then the dull tread of the prisoner tramping up and down his cell. Then nothing, save the horrible silence of the subterranean recesses! Outside the sun inundated the immensity of nature with its light.

Rachele informed Claudia of what the condemned man had said. The two women went for a long walk, in the park.

"And they will continue to say," Claudia exclaimed, "that I am a perverse, diabolical sorceress. They will go on saying that the sentiments which prevail in my heart are those of hate and vengeance; that I have sacrificed people to my whims, that I have degraded the Cardinal; that I have wasted the wealth of the Principate. The people are blind and must be shown the light often. I should have secured the execution of that Martelli. He has been hired by my enemies among the priesthood and nobility to make two attempts to murder me. He has no personal reason for hating me, but he is an instrument in the hands of the Count di Castelnuovo and Don Benizio. The former considers me responsible for the death of Filiberta in the Convent of the Holy Trinity. The second hates me because I sent him away and laughed in his face.

"You well remember, Rachele, when he came here to persuade me to leave the Principate. And that in the name of authorities whom I do not recognize and whom I am not obliged to obey. He profited by the occasion to make me a second

declaration of love. I was sick of being annoyed by him and sent him away. He fled down the Giudicarie road like one possessed of a black devil. In a village in which he interrupted his mad ride; he left memories.

"It was he who armed this wretch whom I have pardoned for your sake. How sad it is to be misunderstood and cursed by those whom one has been kind to.

"But enough of these sad thoughts. Nature smiles and invites us to enjoyment. The world is lovely. It is only men who spoil it. Let us for the sake of a few moments of pleasure endure the exasperating sequel of banishing hopes and human spitefulness, of passing loves, and fading illusions, the tragedy of youth dying day by day."

Claudia seated herself on a rustic wooden bench, whose legs terminated in rudely sculptured lions' paws. She drew from her pocket a little book with decorated and embossed cover, the work of some patient Venetian printer. The author of the book was an amorous poet whose fame died with the century. It was dedicated to Hebe, the goddess of youth. Claudia began to recite some of the verses and Rachele listened. The poet sang the praises of Hebe, dispenser of grace and beauty. He demanded of her pleasure and fame and youth eternal through the centuries. A moment later Claudia closed the book and returned to the castle.

The next morning Rachele returned to the condemned man. She was accompanied by one of

the usual guards and by another woman. Martelli had changed his manner. He was gentler, more human. He greeted Rachele with a profound bow and before she could speak, said:

"I have decided."

"Where will you go ?"

"I shall shut myself in a monastery."

"Then," said Rachele, "seek to do penance. May our forgiveness be the beginning of a new life for you. Within a few hours you will be free."

"Permit me," said Martelli, "to kiss your hand. I shall feel eternally grateful toward you."

The prisoner's lips touched the hand of the generous girl. Rachele departed.

Towards noon Martelli was liberated. One of the guards accompanied him part of the way down the road. After two days he arrived at a monastery which rose close to the Brescian frontier. Here he craved hospitality. It was granted him, and he remained for the rest of his life.

Two days after the liberation of Martelli, Claudia felt a desire to go on an evening excursion on the lake. The sun had not yet set behind the mountains when Claudia, accompanied by Rachele and a man-servant, disembarked on the island. And they set to searching in grass, in the hedge, among the stones near the water. They were looking for the dagger with which Martelli had stabbed Rachele.

The halberdiers had not found it, despite the fact that Martelli had not had time to throw it in the water. The deadly weapon must still be some-

where on the island. The three continued their diligent search.

It was Claudia herself who found the dagger. Rachele felt a shudder pass through her as she looked at the glittering blade still stained with blood.

"Let us preserve it as a memento," said Claudia, placing the weapon in her girdle.

"A sad memento," added Claudia, returning in thought to the tragic evening. They remained on the island a while, and the two women picked several bunches of the marguerites which reared their crowns of white petals above the long grass.

Then they returned to the castle. Claudia, no longer preoccupied with Rachele, resumed her former habits: long morning horseback rides across the fields and along the dusty roads; boat trips on the lake by night. She was trying to benumb her soul by violent physical exercise. Had she not drunk a toast to forgetfulness? To forget! Those were the words which expressed her most intimate longings. To forget, and to enjoy!

CHAPTER XVII

But toward the end of May serious events were taking place in Trent. The papal and the imperial legates, summoned by the Cathedral Chapter, had taken residence in the castle. Their coming had awakened great and exaggerated hopes in the souls of all enemies of the House of the Particella.

In the conversation of the citizens the dismissal of Ludovico Particella and the exile of Claudia were already taken for granted. At last the hour of redemption was about to sound. And the people, as usual, deceived themselves as to the intentions, the power and the capacity of the imperial and papal legates who had come to put the affairs of the Principate in order.

Claudia had been advised of the arrival of the legates by means of a courtier promptly dispatched by Emanuel Madruzzo. He begged her to remain tranquil. Nothing would be done to her, for he would oppose it by every means.

The papal legates, he intimated, were easy-going and docile gentry. Among the five of them Emanuel Madruzzo had three personal friends. The legates of the Empire, three in number, presented no danger. But Claudia was not greatly calmed by these assurances. She was well aware of the ferocious hatred which the ecclesiastics

cherished against her. She knew that they were disposed to promise liberally, provided the Particella family derived no benefit.

"Oh," thought Claudia, "I well know that the priests of the Cathedral want my head. But they will have to fight hard before they get it. And I shall know how to poison their triumph."

At the first banquet, given to the papal and imperial legates toward the end of May, the entire court of the Madruzzo was present, from the highest dignitaries to the humblest functionaries. Claudia had returned from Trent to the proximity of the danger, the better to spy upon the movements of her mortal enemies and parry their blows, to grant the Cardinal the ultimate flatter of her love, and to instigate her father to retain his post. She would not be absent from the Lucullian banquet.

Her determination to be present had caused a crisis among the invited guests. The imperial legates seemed ill-disposed to banquet with the celebrated courtesan, hated by the entire population of Trent. But the papal legates, despite all the discreet promptings of the members of the Chapter, passed over these Puritanical scruples. It was a universal custom, even in the hierarchy of the Church of Rome, to dine with many women and gay ones.

Claudia accordingly conquered once more and took her place at the head of the tables in the largest hall of the castle. About the daring conqueror were grouped the papal and imperial legates, the heads of the Madruzzo court, several dignitaries

of the clergy of Trent, the commissioners of the troop, the chief functionaries of the Principate, and finally the intimate friends of the Cardinal, who was seated opposite to her. The guests were splendidly arrayed, and adorned with gold and silver. But on the Cardinal's breast no crosses gleamed. An elementary sense of decency had caused him to leave them behind. The Crucified One, who had neither bread to eat nor stone whereon to lay His head might not assist even in effigy at the succulent supper of his latter-day followers.

The tables glittered with the finest linen, the work of Bohemian artisans. In silver goblets gleamed the suave wines which the vines of the Trentine mountains produce when long sunny days have ripened the clusters of grapes hanging amid the withering yellow foliage. On the table appeared all the choice and rare dishes which the kitchen of a prince can prepare. The hot odour of the viands mingled with the May perfumes wafted by the evening breeze through the large, open windows. The lamps which hung from the high and richly painted ceiling oscillated slightly, tracing fleeting shadows on the long walls.

The guests are in silence. Such is the custom at the banquets of cardinals. When the powerful and ample mandibles of the servants of God are working, the tongue is silent, the brain is asleep. Free and jovial conversation commences only when that indefinable sense of well-being in the full stomach spreads through every fibre of the body, and the first light intoxication turns the head,

brings a flush to the cheeks and a gleam to the eyes, unties the tongue and evokes a vague and subtle desire for that expert feminine caress which helps man forget the pain and misery of life.

The banqueters of the castle had studied well the art of eating. They had exercised their teeth on the most delicate game from the royal and imperial parks of all the countries of Europe. They had taken their places at all tables save those of the brutalized poor and the more humble monasteries. They were the representatives of the fat epoch, when men ate with the refined greed of those who live only for eating. There were the pagans of the decadence masked under the hierarchy of Catholic Christianity, embossing upon their banners the utmost of Epicureanism, understood as a self-indulgence of a sort which the ancient philosopher had never intended.

"Eat and drink, for there is no pleasure after death." Or else, with Horace, they cried: "Carpe diem!" They were the reformers of the people, the representative men of the papal and secular courts. They were the men who wasted the wealth which the brutalized people had accumulated by their long years of labour, the men who strode with full bellies through the human vale of tears, a smile of satisfaction on their sensual lips.

What had they done at Trent? They had held a few audience. They had interrogated various functionaries, many priests, and practically no one representing the people. They had no desire to hear the voice and the complaint

of the poor. What did they expect to accomplish? How did they plan to fulfil their mission? Would they have the courage to go to the bottom of things? Would these legates, who had come by express order of the Pope and the Emperor, put in order the political and administrative affairs of the Principate?

And Claudia? Were they thinking of exiling her? Did they, indeed, have any desire to exile her? And if they did, would they succeed?

Claudia, in the meantime, instead of taking the via dolorosa of exile, was banqueting haily with those who should be singing her verdict of guilt. And the fair courtesan, holding her head high to meet the glances and the mannered compliments which were offered her, thought: "These are my enemies. Once again I find myself among them, defenceless, unarmed. But I fear them not.... these old, fat, well-fed men can do me no harm. No. In these bald and pimpled heads there are no savage instincts. To hate it is necessary to suffer. To long for a revenge it is necessary to have a soul. These bodies puffed with gluttony have no souls. They are brutal, bestial."

And Claudia felt contempt for these lords with irregular faces, flat retreating foreheads, eyes hidden beneath heavy eyebrows, monkeylike hands, and enormous puffed lips parted to reveal their devouring teeth. They were already old, these legates who represented two senescent institutions, the Papacy and the Empire.

Only one of the guests stood out as an exception, an official of Hungarian blood who was in the

suite of an imperial legate. He was very young, hardly twenty. His face was regular and moulded with an almost feminine regularity. Over his forehead and his shoulders fell his thick chestnut locks. His large eyes were luminous and profound. His colour was pallid, his hands delicate.

He was not talking. He was gazing at Claudia. Several times his glances encountered hers, and it was the young cavalier who first lowered his eyes.

Towards the end of the meal the conversation became general. Stories, songs, cries and laughter resounded. It was the hour in which the man disappears and the animal takes his place. Every human reticence is cast aside. All the social conventions fall to the ground. The rules of etiquette no longer have any significance. Revelry makes men akin, whether in the fetid and smoky caverns of a wine-cellar, or in the resplendent halls of a princely palace.

The servants continued to fill the goblets with wine. Then the dishes were removed. No speeches were made. It was no formal banquet and it was certainly not the last of the series. The guests dispersed among the various rooms of the castle. Some descended to walk in the deer-park. Claudia and the Cardinal, with Ludovico Particella and a few others, among them the Hungarian knight, remained in the banquet hall. Claudia was seated by the window and was drinking in the perfumed air which blew from the Adige valley covered with the shadows of night.

In the sky above the stars were laughing.

From time to time came a voice, a sound, and indistinguishable rumour from the sleeping city. From the interior of the castle were heard outbursts of laughter from the guests, who were walking through the corridors on their way to the romanesque balcony, a magnificent point from which to view at a glance the nocturnal panorama.

The conversation of those who had remained with the Cardinal and Claudia became lively. The Hungarian knight, encouraged by Claudia's friendly and seductive glances, had suddenly lost his timidity and was now recounting some unusual adventures of his youth. Claudia felt a new sentiment arising in her heart—a strong and unexpected impulse towards the Hungarian youth. Ah! the comparison with Emanuel! That old, ruined, discouraged man; and the other in the flower of proud youth—of youth which has voice for all songs, which quivers to all passions, which ever responds to the illusion of the spring-time. "Love quickly loves the loving heart," sang Dante, the immortal father of our race. And in the hearts of women, especially when they are approaching the sunset of their maturity love unfolds suddenly, fragrantly, desperately and madly, like some tropical flower at the first kiss of the sun.

The knight held forth. Claudia felt her old love for Cardinal falling from her. Long dead was that divine vibration of all the chords of one's being which is called love. Pale echoes about to die away were the witnesses that it happened once upon a time, that hymn of a triumphal passion. The

unknown had appeared.

Emanuel had never had rivals. Claudia had been faithful. She was proud of her faithfulness. She could boast of her unchanged loyalty to Emanuel. But to-day! The new guest had come. Another love, whose victorious themes heralded the coming and perhaps the last symphony of a lust not subdued, but resurgent in the melancholy maturity of years, like a late flower opening in the April morning! Claudia felt that she would love this guest who had come from afar, brought by the destiny which impels human souls by unknown ways and inscrutable means towards the destined meeting place.

Claudia....the perfect type of the capricious, sensitive, cruel and merciful courtesan....turned towards the Hungarian who represented for her the possibility of another love affair. These sentiments were troubling her as the Cardinal leaned towards her as though to scent the penetrating odour of her flesh and speak to her of illusions which will not die.

But the dialogue was brusquely interrupted. The noise of a boisterous quarrel echoed from an inner corridor of the castle. Every one rushed at once in that direction. Two knights who had drawn their swords and threatened to fight a duel "under the pious light of the virgin stars." But soon the two were calmed and returned to the castle. Claudia and the others resumed their places.

It was not far from midnight. But during Claudia's brief absence her doom had been prepared.

The quarrel had been pre-arranged, and in the interval a servant in the pay of the Count di Castelnuovo had poured a mortal poison into Claudia's wine glass.

Claudia drank, on her return, suspecting nothing. She emptied the glass. But hardly had she placed it upon the table when she felt a slight quiver of illness coursing through her veins. She thought it might be the night chill. The windows had remained open. But then the distress became more acute and her whole body shivered.

Claudia became pale. She rose and said:

"I do not feel well."

And seeing that all rose at her words and that the Cardinal betrayed a sudden terrible suspicion, Claudia made a reassuring gesture and added:

"Do not worry on my account. Be seated, gentlemen, I pray you. And you, my courtiers, do not interrupt the narration of your marvellous adventures."

But, going to the window supported by the Cardinal and her father, Claudia had a prolonged convulsion. Her eyes opened wide, dismayed at the vision of death. Emanuel stammered affectionate words. Her father supported her. All the others surrounded her, terrified at the thought of some misfortune. From the corridors and the halls of the castle and from the deer-park the guests returned. Soon the entire hall was full. No voice broke the silence. The men dared not look at one another. On the tables the flowers were wilting and the lights of the hanging lamps

were trembling as though moved by invisible wings.

Claudia was reclining in an arm-chair, her head thrown back. She was repeating a single phrase:

"I am dying! I am dying! I am dying!"

The Cardinal kneeled near her and pressed her hand. He called to her. A physician approached. He ordered that Claudia be immediately put to bed. Then he made his examination and declared:

"She has been poisoned."

"I am dying! I am dying!" Claudia repeated, in ever weaker voice.

"Poison? Did you say poison?" the Cardinal thundered at the physician, who was terrified at this unexpected outburst of wrath.

"Poison? And is there no remedy?"

"No."

But as though repenting his statement, the physician added:

"Nature may work miracles. But look, my lords, how the patient's face is becoming discoloured. See how her limbs shiver. Feel how cold her feet are."

"Poison? Did you say poison?" repeated the Cardinal, menacingly. "Someone has poisoned her. Ah! Ah! Ah!"

"I am dying! I am dying!" repeated Claudia.

Ludovico Particella, his voice mute with sorrow and his eyes swollen with tears, had flung him-

self down near the head of the bed, beside the woman in her last agonies. He called to her in the words which only a father can invoke in the indescribable hours of desperation.

The Cardinal left the room and strode into the hall where the guests had remained, huddled together in terror.

"It is poison! It is poison!" he cried. The legates of the Empire and of the Pope had no time to pronounce a single word of exculpation or consolation. For Emanuel continued to cry like a mad man, in a harsh voice broken with sobs: "It is poison! Which of you has poured poison in Claudia's goblet? It is poison, I tell you. It is poison which is killing Claudia. Poison poured in her goblet by the practised hand of an assassin! Poison which was brought to this table at which I thought none but friends were gathered. How could it be?

"Does no one speak? Does no one defend himself? Do you remain cold, motionless, mute, as though the outrage were nothing to you?

"Away from here! Away from these halls! Away from this castle! Obey me, all of you! One of you is the assassin! The assassin!"

And since the legates of the Pope and the Emperor seemed hesitant to leave the room, he yelled:

"You too, away from here! I fear you no longer. In the castle of the Madruzzo Emanuel, the last of his race, commands you. He alone. None other. Obey me and quickly."

The crowd did not seem to share this outburst

of exasperation, nor to be greatly moved at Claudia's tragedy. The Hungarian knight came forward and sought to calm Emanuel. He did not succeed. He, too, was rejected.

The guests departed. "He is mad," said the papal legates, covering their shoulders with their ample velvet mantles as they prepared to descend the stairs. "He is mad," agreed the legates of the Emperor.

"He is mad," decided the dignitaries of the clergy of Trent.

"He is mad," said the knights, girding on their swords.

"He is mad. He is mad." This was the universal comment.

"He has been made mad by love," said one of the papal legates. "It is a little late."

"It is certainly an incurable madness," added another priest ironically.

Not even the intimates of the Cardinal dared remain with him. The tragedy had overwhelmed them. They felt the need of leaving those halls where death had so unexpectedly entered.

Emanuel, after his violent, mad, brutal outburst returned to Claudia's bedside. In the small room there was no one, save Ludovico and the physician. The Cardinal, beckoning to the physician, commanded:

"Go away as soon as your work is ended."

The physician bowed and departed.

Claudia no longer complained. Her face was convulsed, her hands nervously clutched the bed

covers, and reached out towards those of the Cardinal. They were the movements of one soon to abandon life, clutching at any nearby object.

"Claudia! Claudia! Claudia!" cried the Cardinal, in a voice no longer human.

But Claudia did not reply. Her lips were mute. From her divine mouth, now twisted into a sad grimace, no sound came. In vain did the Cardinal bend over her, as though to hold back the life which was seeking to fly away. The poison was completing its work of destruction.

And Claudia died without imprecations, like the courtesans of ancient times who went secretly to death, sure that the god of love would withhold their souls from the sad abodes of the inferno to receive them in the clear and luminous Elysian fields.

Midnight sounded from the city towers. The lamps quivered. Someone called through the silence. Someone. But it was not possible to hear the name. Claudia stretched out her hands. Her face became once more calm. The quivering of the limbs ceased.

Then nothing. The sobbing of two men, a sobbing that broke through the darkness like an unexpected sound in a deserted room.

Claudia the courtesan, Claudia of the diabolical black eyes, Claudia would no longer bewitch Emanuel with her sorceries, Claudia the capricious would no longer waste his wealth. Claudia would no longer pardon her aggressors, nor smite her enemies. Claudia was now inert matter: or else a soul.

Claudia was a name....She was a name only, no longer to be cursed, for death cancels and attenuates the hates, the suspicions and the rancours of men, and disarms their plans of vengeance.

Behind the curtains stood the servants of the Cardinal. They seemed moved. Among them the guilty one perhaps began to feel his heart lacerated by the vipers of remorse.

CHAPTER XVIII

The ceremony of Claudia's funeral was solemn. The people did not participate. The clergy participated by compulsion. Claudia was accompanied to her eternal abode by the general indifference of the city.

For several days the legates abstained from visiting Emanuel Madruzzo. The latter, in accord with Ludovico Particella, initiated an inquest. The guilty person remained unknown. The Count di Castelnuovo and Don Benizio rejoiced at the tidings.

All the enemies of the Particella family foresaw its immediate ruin. In fact, a few weeks after Claudia's death, the legates of the Empire demanded of the Cardinal the dismissal of Ludovico Particella. The Cardinal did not resist.

He no longer had any energy or will power and resigned himself to all the blows of destiny, and witnessed the departure of the old counsellor who for twenty years had assisted and guided him.

Ludovico Particella went to Italy and there passed the remainder of his life.

The Cardinal shut himself up in his apartments and disinterested himself entirely from the affairs of the Principate.

He emerged from his solitude only to order a

nocturnal penitential procession. It should be a procession to coincide with the trigesimo of Claudia's death. And it should be the apotheosis of his unforgettable friend. The order of this procession caused some surprise to the priests of the Cathedral Chapter. But the papal legates believed that it was the penitence of Emanuel Madruzzo, who by this solemn public act would initiate the expiation of his sins. And the dumb hostility would cease.

For a whole week, morning and evening, from all the altars of all the churches, the priests renewed the invitation to the faithful. The procession must be imposing and no believer must be absent. The Cardinal had commanded it. He wished to cancel his past, to become once more the shepherd of his flock. Many of the Cardinal's enemies had put away their wrath. The disappearance of Claudia aroused exaggerated hopes. The presence of the legates must complete the work and restore order in the Principate.

Great was the anticipation of the procession throughout the city. In all the sacristies the preparations were pushed. From old wardrobes, from antique chests, people drew forth stuffs to adorn their costumes. For ten years no such ceremony had been solemnized—and such a ceremony was of great importance in those times. The servants talked of nothing else. All believed that this was to be a public act of expiation. The Cardinal Emanuel was about to return to his people, after cleansing himself of his scandalous past.

No one could suspect that the penitential procession would be an apotheosis of Claudia. No one dared imagine that this would be a posthumous glorification of the courtesan who had brought prince and Principate to the verge of ruin. No one dared imagine that the solemn ceremony was dedicated to Claudia the profane adulteress.

Nevertheless, it was this final satisfaction which the Cardinal craved. "You, my people,".... thus the Cardinal thought...."have not shared my grief over Claudia's death. You rejoiced in her sudden and mysterious disappearance. Perhaps the assassin who poisoned my unforgettable friend sprang from your loins. You, priests, have rejoiced in my sorrow, and your prayers were but lies. You, aristocrats, friends of the Count Antonio di Castelnuovo, have greeted the end of Claudia as the beginning of your fortunes. You, papal legates, you emissaries of the Emperor believe that your mission has been facilitated because Claudia Particella was assassinated by a foul instrument of the papal court. All you, who hated Claudia, will participate in the procession which I have ordered in her honour. You will expiate the hatred which has poisoned you for so many years."

From all the towers of the city the bells pealed at the approach of evening on the day fixed for the procession. Dusk descended from the mountain peaks still bathed in the light of the setting sun. The shades of night descended.

At ten o'clock the bells rang again. The sky, aglow with the stars, echoed the metallic vibration.

A stranger approaching the San Lorenzo bridge would have thought, upon hearing this furious tintinnabulation: "What dread rebellion is agitating the people of Trent? What dread peril impends over the city, if all the towers utter their brazen cries of warning? Is it a fire? An invasion?"

Meanwhile the obedient people were issuing into the streets and directing their steps towards the Cathedral square, whence the procession was to start. The church stood with doors wide open and all the altars gleamed with candlelight. An unwonted excitement could be noted among the priests at the back of the church, where clouds of incense obscured the outlines of things and men. The crowd came and went, filling the church with a dull reverberation.

Subdued gestures, murmured prayers, restrained gestures in the darkness. When the arrival of the Cardinal was announced the people filled the church. Emanuel Madruzzo was wearing the sacred vestments and was followed by four prelates. Almost oblivious of the crowd, which bowed to him as he passed, he reached the altar and began the ceremony.

He had not officiated as priest for a long time. For a long time he had not served the Lord in the presence of the people.

The ceremony finished, amid the intense emotion of the faithful, the procession was ordered to start. At its head, as it issued from the cathedral, were four sturdy prelates bearing banners. After

them marched a large brigade of priests intoning the litany. And after them, the Cardinal. He was surrounded by the high dignitaries of the Clergy of Trent.

He walked with bowed head, his hand clutched upon his breast where a cross gleamed. Following him marched a long squadron of halberdiers. After them an interminable procession of women. The entire feminine population of Trent was represented. There were the ladies of the aristocracy, distinguishable by their ample velvet mantles. Their heads were bound by black veils and their eyes were fixed on the ground. Then came the shabbily dressed women of the people, some of them in rags, their shoulders covered with great Venetian shawls. Behind the women marched the disordered mass of men of all ages and professions. The lugubrious procession ended with a group of knights.

All the windows of the city gleamed with candles. Out of them leaned the aged and the cripples saluting the sacred banners with humble devotion. The procession had a bizarre and fantastic appearance. The torches cast flecks of reddish light on the houses as they passed, while shadows fluttered on the walls.

For a while the multitude seemed mute. No voice was raised, and the silence was broken only by the steady rhythm of the marching throng. Then, near the church of Saint Peter, a chorus began to sing. The priests gave the signal to the people and the multitude took up the chant. The

people joined with all their hearts in this hymn of expiation.

For the first and last time in his life the Cardinal Emanuel Madruzzo deliberately deceived his people. During the procession a single thought occupied him. It was the thought of Claudia.

One image only appeared before his eyes. It was Claudia's. He invoked but one name: Claudia. No, this was no ceremony of purification. Ah, if the psalm-singing priests at the Cardinal's side had even suspected the thoughts which had possession of his soul, they would certainly have cried: Sacrilege! They would have aroused the entire people to fanatical religious fury. The nocturnal penitential procession would have been suddenly turned into an indescribable tumult in which, perhaps, the Cardinal would have lost his life.

But it is not permitted to man to read the thoughts of his fellows. Every one has one or more closed pages in the book of his life. There is in each of us something which does not come, and can never come, to the surface. We are profoundly distant, one from another. What is called the union of souls is but one of the illusions which are necessary to our existence. The human soul is lonely. It has no sisters. The mother cannot read the thoughts of her daughter. The judge cannot penetrate the mystery of the crime. The lover deceives himself. You may possess the body, but the soul escapes you.

"Claudia! Claudia! Claudia!" was the theme

of Emanuel Madruzzo's secret thought. The still living passion suggested the dialogue with the dear spirit of the departed.

"Claudia! Behold a people which is wasting away, which is chastising itself because of you! Claudia! Behold one more gift which your inconsolable lover offers you! These people hated you, yet this very night they are unwittingly lamenting you and paying you homage."

The procession continued through the main streets of the city and thence returned to the Cathedral square. The moon, a tiny face in the immensity of the heavens, diffused a tenuous glow and cast the shadows of the towers across the streets. From the fountains spouted silver streams of water. Neptune, the king of the seas, seemed to smile ironically at the Christian mob which was missing its sleep to honour the pagan gods.

The banners passed by. The Cardinal passed by. The church swallowed up the priests. The crowd dispersed.

At midnight Emanuel Madruzzo returned to the castle.

He dragged out the remainder of his existence like a heavy chain. He died on December 15, 1658. With him the family of the Madruzzo was extinguished. With his death ended the most glorious and intense epoch of the Principate of Trent.

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